

UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY

Honouring the Resistance:

Understanding Single Mothers' Pursuit of Postsecondary Education

by

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A THESIS

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES
IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE
DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS

FACULTY OF EDUCATION

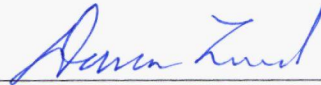
CALGARY, ALBERTA

November 2007


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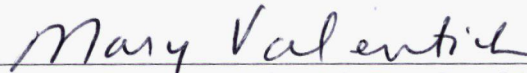
The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies for acceptance, a thesis entitled "Honouring the Resistance: Understanding Single Mothers' Pursuit of Post Secondary Education" submitted by Suzzanne Green in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of Master of Arts.



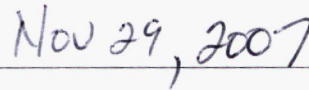
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Abstract

High poverty rates, low education levels and negative stereotypes characterize the social conditions of Canadian single mothers, especially Aboriginal single mothers, to such a degree that they experience oppression. This qualitative research study is focused on the experiences of six low-income women who were single mothers when they attended and completed post-secondary education programs. Post-secondary education is positioned here as a form of liberation and the interplay of oppression and resistance is examined against these women's stories. It was found that these women developed a "critical consciousness" (Freire, 1973) that helped them make the decision to return to school. Also, a personal form of resistance (Wade, 1997) is identified and honoured as a strategy that helped them successfully complete their programs. Finally their post-secondary experiences are evaluated for their liberating effect in the context of "education as the practice of freedom" hooks (1994).

Acknowledgements

First, I would like to thank the six women who shared their stories with me. Although I have tried to respect and represent them as best I could, my work only touches on their amazing stories and outstanding accomplishments. They demonstrate why accessible post-secondary education is so very important, and what they have achieved makes this research real.

Very soon after I started my Master's degree I was blessed with the influence of two extremely kind and patient men. The compassionate scholar, Dr. Darren Lund, as my advisor, granted me the academic freedom to follow my passion and continued to provided leadership and inspiration even when progress was slow. My spouse, Graham McDonald, continuously went above and beyond, reading and commenting on my work as well as accommodating all the life-rearranging strategies I seemed to need to complete this research.

I would like to thank my dear friend, Val Millar, and her husband, both academics, who helped me get reacquainted with being a student and opened up their home to me whenever I needed to be in Calgary. My children, Alanna and Tyler, both post-secondary students, provided encouragement and understanding. Finally, I would like to forgive and thank their father, the late Raymond Quock, without whom this journey would have never taken place.

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List of Symbols, Abbreviations and Nomenclature

Symbol	Definition
LICO	Low Income Cut Off
LIM	Low Income Measure
DIA	Department of Indian Affairs
US	United States

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

This qualitative research study is focused on the experiences of six women who were single mothers when they attended and completed post-secondary education programs. I sought to understand the paths these women followed in order to achieve their educational goals and to discover important aspects of their experiences that might be used to encourage and support others to do the same. This study explores resistance as a strategy used by single mothers to successfully participate in post-secondary education programs.

Discussion within this study will, for the most part, be set within the Canadian context. However, where appropriate or necessary, it will draw on sources from the academic literature outside of Canada. Initially, I had planned to study low-income single mothers in a general sense but, as I got to know my participants, that approach changed. Two of the participants are Aboriginal, and since the profile and social conditions for Aboriginal single mothers in Canada is unique, this group is given some specific attention. Also, three of my participants first became parents when they were teenagers, and some attention is paid to them as a group.

This chapter introduces me as the researcher. It then introduces the research problem by outlining the context within which Canadian single mothers live and how they are treated in the literature.

My Story, My Bias

Like the women in this study, I was once a low-income single mother who returned to school. I enjoyed my academic journeys and have encouraged other single mothers to pursue post-secondary education. While I do not want my story to dominate, I

think it is important to offer an overview of it. I am biased in that I believe post-secondary education is important, and I know it improved and maybe even saved my life.

I have often said that I earned a university degree as a coping mechanism for trying to live within a dysfunctional marriage. Six years after I graduated from high school, I married the man I had started dating in my final year. During the six years we stayed married, I “ran away” to school several times. It was my safe place where I could buy time in hope that my husband, back in the Yukon, might deal with his anger management problem. Going away to school was a socially acceptable thing to do and school was easy compared to trying to deal, on a day-to-day basis, with our family life.

One year after my second child was born, it became clear to me that my husband was not coping, and a healthy family life required permanent separation. My income from my own business was less than one thousand dollars per month. We were poor but, comparatively speaking, life was good. For about two years I continued to run my own business and also attended college part-time to earn a few more university credits. My husband was no longer a threat to the children and me and, in fact, he was able to be much more supportive as a part-time father role than he ever was as a full-time husband and father.

As a single mother I had a new fear; I was becoming increasingly afraid that I might become one of those single parents who could not provide adequately for her children. While my income from the business continued to grow, it was still low and lacked the security I was seeking. I felt as if I was on a precarious perch from which I might easily fall, and become one of those struggling welfare single mothers. That fear ruled my life; I worked ridiculously hard to ensure that it did not happen.

When an opportunity came to sell my business, I snatched it and returned to Calgary to finish my university degree. Courtesy of my earlier “running away” and subsequent part-time attendance, I had three years of my four-year undergraduate degree complete. My goal was to finish my degree and then return to the Yukon to get a secure government job. It worked; I graduated, got the job and was able to provide adequately for my children.

When I look back, I realize that the “precarious perch” feeling persisted throughout my parenting life. Even though I got my degree, had a good salary, owned my own home, and sent my kids to a prestigious private high school, the fear of being a struggling, welfare single mom lingered and ruled my life. My sister, also a single mother, but with more children and less education, had a really difficult time making ends meet and occasionally had to rely on welfare. I did not want to be like her. I could see and feel society’s attitudes towards single mothers and their children and it was extremely important that my little family be different.

I remember planning a short trip to Chicago with a friend who was also a single mother. There was a seat sale offered from Whitehorse, so the two of us decided to go on a four-day break to the windy city. My father questioned whether I could really afford it and suggested that I should not be travelling so much. I remember getting really angry and saying something such as:

Do you know what this kind of travel means to me? It means that I am not a struggling single parent. It makes me feel like I am a normal person who deserves to have a bit of fun. It means that I am together enough that I can go away for a

few days without my world falling apart. It means that I am worthy. How dare you say I do not deserve it.

I look back on these times and realize that I often felt judged, and that people somehow wanted me to fit into the single mother stereotype. Even those close to me somehow thought that, because I was a single mother, I did not deserve a good life.

This Master's project has helped me to better understand my single mother identity. I know now that I was always feeling—but more importantly, resisting—the oppression associated with the poverty and stereotypes of single mothers in Canada. Looking back, I realize that for me, pushing back through education was by far the most effective resistance; it is what gave me choices and it is what made life better for me and for my children.

Problem Statement: Life as a Canadian Single Mother

I suggest that, because of the social conditions they face, single mothers in Canada experience oppression. Oppression is defined as the unjustifiable placing of a burden on someone or some group, by interfering with their powers, interests, or opportunities. Oppression may be deliberate, or an unintended outcome of social arrangements; it may be recognized for what it is, or may go unremarked even by those oppressed. (Blackburn, 2005)

Negative stereotypes and harmful myths associated with single mothers are prolific and promulgated through the media and public policy forums (Bashevkin, 2002; Ganong & Coleman, 1995). Statistics paint a grim picture of the social conditions of Canadian single mothers, especially Aboriginal single parent mothers (Hull, 2001; Ross, Scott, & Smith, 2000). When looked at as a group, single mothers experience low education levels and

very high poverty rates (Ross et al., 2000). While some research concerning this group is helpful, other studies are conducted and written in such a way that they are more likely to perpetuate the myths and exacerbate problems for low-income single mothers.

This research explores post-secondary education as a possible solution to the oppression that low-income single mothers and explores the motivational role that resistance might play in their post-secondary education successes.

Significance of the Problem

Stereotypes

Stereotypes about mothers are likely influenced by what feminists have labelled the “myth of motherhood” that identifies mothers as either all good or all bad: “They are either perfectly loving, kind, patient, and giving, or they are rejecting, cold, and controlling” (Ganong & Coleman, 1995, p. 496). In a study of the contents of mother stereotypes Ganong & Coleman (1995) found that married mothers were very strongly stereotyped in a favourable way and never married mothers were very strongly stereotyped in an unfavourable way.

Married mothers are stereotyped as possessing many positive personality traits and personal characteristics (e.g., forgiving, generous, protective, warm and caring)... Married mothers are generally seen as possessing more positive characteristics than women-in-general ... The stereotypes about married mothers are consistently, and with rare exception, much more positive than those of stepmothers, divorced mothers, and never married mothers. (p. 507)

Ganong and Coleman also found that, “there was considerable evidence supporting the assertion that married mothers are the standard by which others are evaluated” (p. 507).

Divorced mothers are stereotyped less favourably than married mothers. They are stereotyped as “lonely, unhappy, and stressed... possessing fewer positive and more negative personal characteristics than married mothers or women-in-general” (p. 508) and never married mothers are stereotyped as

unpleasant people who possess many negative and few positive personal traits.

They are stereotyped as having poor childrearing abilities, as being failures as marital partners and family members, and as being products of unhappy families growing up. They are seen as impoverished, with grim prospects for the future.

Never married mothers are generally seen as unhappy and troubled deviants from society. (p. 508)

Stereotypes about single mothers are ubiquitous, and these stereotypes have increasingly become the focus of Canadian social policy (Bashevkin, 2002). In her book, *Welfare Hot Buttons: Women, Work and Social Policy Reform*, Bashevkin analyses the recent changes in welfare policy in Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States, and notes that over the last twenty five years, “single mothers on social assistance were increasingly identified as lazy, deceitful and, above all, personally irresponsible in their use of public funds to cultivate a life of leisure without paid work (p. 11). Ganong and Coleman (1995) discuss the public policy implications of single mother stereotypes:

Even policy makers who do not subscribe to all the characteristics identified as stereotypes in this study may find their efforts to develop policies and programs hampered by public opinion that is informed by these beliefs. For example, since never married mothers are seen as more likely than other mothers to be

“irresponsible,” “stupid,” “drug abusers” who are “unable to successfully raise

children,” policy makers may find it easier to institute punitive rather than supportive policies and programs for these mothers. (p.510)

Holyfield (2002), in her study of single parents returning to school in Arkansas, demonstrates that the stereotypes about single mothers are gross misrepresentations of this group, and yet the barriers they face because of these stereotypes are very real. In the United States the term “welfare queen” was first used by Ronald Reagan in a speech in 1976 and has since become a term regularly used to portray single mothers on social assistance who purposefully have numerous children just to pad their social assistance benefits (Wikipedia, 2007). In the United States the image is usually of a Black woman and in Canada the image is more likely to be a First Nation woman.

Stereotypes about a group not only affect the behaviours of the stereotyped group, but also affect the behaviours of those who interact with them (Ganong & Coleman, 1995). People expect single mothers to fit the stereotypes and sometimes unknowingly, make decisions based only on stereotypes rather than on the character, or the situation, of the individual single mother. For example, people may exclude single mothers and their families from social activities because they are seen as bad influences (Adair & Dahlberg, 2003), and Bloom (2001) found that teachers can be intimidating, disrespectful, and insulting, and speak to single mothers in a patronizing tones. Negative myths and stereotypes regularly create barriers for single mothers, especially low-income single mothers and single mothers on social assistance (Adair, 2001; Adair & Dahlberg, 2003; Bashevkin, 2002; Holyfield, 2002; Jennings, 2004).

Data in the Literature

Statistics about single mothers can be found throughout the literature, especially literature concerned with poverty. Still, I found it very difficult to decide what information to use to present a profile of this group. Sometimes statistics can be misleading and while I wanted this profile to illustrate the scope of the problem, I also wanted it to provide an appreciation of the diversity within the group. Definitions used for single mothers, poverty, and education levels can vary greatly and a profile created with statistics from many different sources would likely be more confusing than illuminating.

Even though poverty and education levels are explicitly linked, some large quantitative studies about single mothers and poverty do not include any information about education levels (Dooley, Finnie, Phipps, & Naylor, 1995; Finnie, 2000). I did find two studies that profiled Canadian single mothers using fairly recent data, including data relating to education. One study, *Profiles and Transitions of Groups at Risk of Social Exclusion: Lone Parents*, (Kapsalis & Tourigny, 2002) was so obviously biased that I did not want to rely too heavily on the data it contained. (A discussion of the problems with the Kapsalis and Tourigny study can be found later in this chapter.) The most comprehensive profile of Canadian single mothers is presented by Hull (2001), who was commissioned by the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs to publish a statistical profile of Aboriginal single mothers based on 1996 Census Data. This report provides a comprehensive profile of both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Canadian single mothers and includes information about school attendance and education levels. While this study provides a more balanced view than the Kapsalis report, the data are still somewhat

problematic. The report has some unexplainable inconsistencies between the various tables. For example, the number of other Canadian (non-Aboriginal) single mothers is reported as 897,000 in table 7 and then as 525,760 in table 9. While Hull (2001) remains a valuable resource I did not want to rely on it to create a profile for this study.

Statistics can be very powerful, and how the prevalence of single mothers is reported in the literature is very important. Often single mothers are inappropriately compared to all women or the population as a whole rather than to other mothers. This can be misleading, especially when within-group or sub-group to sub-group comparisons are made. For example, consider the following statements, both of which are true.

- Young Aboriginal women, 15-24 years old, are more than three times as likely [9.7%] to be single mothers as other young Canadian women [2.9%] (Hull, 2001, p. 100).
- Young Aboriginal mothers, 15-24 years old, are only slightly more likely to be single (37.5%) than other young Canadian mothers (32.7%).

All of the data in the above two statements along with quite a bit of explanation can be found in the Hull (2001) report, but it is only the first statement that is explicitly written and then highlighted in the summary and conclusions section of the report. Hence the myth and the stereotype prevail when the reality is that, among young mothers, the prevalence of single mothers is quite close between the Aboriginal single mother population and the non-Aboriginal single mother population. This particular example is extreme and was chosen specifically to highlight the importance of how numbers are reported. Overall, Aboriginal women are more likely to be mothers and overall they are twice as likely to be single than other Canadian mothers.

Statistical Profile of Canadian Single Mothers

Given the above stated problems associated with statistics about single mothers as presented in the literature, I chose to create a statistical profile primarily by using custom extracts from the 2001 Canadian census (Statistics Canada, 2001). Except as noted, I subset the data to include only mothers that are between the ages of 15 and 54. While there are single mothers that are younger and older than these ages, their numbers are small and for simplicity I have chosen not to include them. I only included mothers that have children under the age of 15 living with them. While this is a young age, I chose it because a child under 15 would not be working and it provided a reasonable comparison to the 1996 census data used by Hull (2001). The tables report on two subgroups that I refer to as status groups; Aboriginal (all types of aboriginal identification) and other Canadian (those without Aboriginal identification). Some tables provide a comparison between single mothers, and married mothers, which includes both mothers who are married as well as those in common-law marriages. As appropriate, I also draw on data from other studies and occasionally, where longitudinal data is needed, I must rely on lone-parent data which includes lone fathers.

The following profile of the approximately 600,000 Canadian single mothers is organized into four sections: age, poverty/income, education, and participation in education.

Age

The age distribution of single mothers is indicated in Table 1. The majority (77%) of single mothers are within the 25-34 and 35-44 age categories Aboriginal single

mothers are younger, with 24% in the youngest category compared to other Canadian single mothers with only 11% in the youngest category.

Table 1: Distribution of Single Mothers by Age:

Count and within group percentage	Aboriginal	Other Canadian
15-24	11329 (24%)	58324 (11%)
25-34	18173 (39%)	171636 (33%)
35-44	13586 (29%)	233962 (45%)
45-54	3512 (8%)	58152 (11%)

Source: Statistics Canada (2001) Note: Subset of single mothers 15 through 54 years of age with at least one child under the age of 15 living at home.

The prevalence of single mothers, represented as a percentage of all mothers in their respective age and status group, is reported in Table 2. The highest level of single motherhood for both Aboriginal (51%) and other Canadian groups (40%) can be found in the youngest 15-24-year-old age category. In all the other age categories, the prevalence of single motherhood continues at about one in three (33%) for Aboriginal mothers and about one out of every six (16%) for other Canadian single mothers. In all but the youngest category, Aboriginal mothers are just over twice as likely to be single mothers as other Canadian mothers.

Table 2: Prevalence of Single Mothers as a Percentage of Mothers in-group by Age

	Aboriginal	Other Canadian
15-24	51.4%	39.9%
25-34	35.4%	16.9%
35-44	31.9%	15.1%
45-54	32.6%	16.8%

Source: Statistics Canada (2001) Note: Subset of mothers 15 through 54 years of age with at least one child under the age of 15 living at home.

Poverty/Income

Both poverty rates and income levels are used within this paper to discuss and compare the financial situations of single mothers. The literature contains substantial debate about how to define and measure poverty. The Canadian Council on Social Development (2001) researched two of the more commonly used definitions and measurements in Canada. They applied both Low Income Cut-offs (LICO) and Low Income Measures (LIM) to the same family data from Revenue Canada tax files and census files and then compared the resulting poverty rates. The outcome demonstrated the importance of understanding the different definitions for poverty and the implications each definition may have on different demographic groups. For couples with or without children, the poverty rates were similar using either the LICO or the LIM, but for single parents and unattached individuals the results differ. For single parents the LICO definition equates to a 55% poverty rate and LIM a 44% poverty rate (2001).

When discussing poverty rates I have chosen to focus on data that use the LICO definition because it most appropriately recognizes the unique economic conditions of single parent families and also it is the more consistently used measure (Ross et al.,

2000). Table 3 contains the LICO rates for 2001, the same year as the census data used in the other tables that make up this profile.

Table 3: 2001 Low Income Cut Offs before Taxes

Size of family unit/\$	Rural areas	Less than 30,000	30,000 to 99,999	100,000 to 499,999	500,000 and over
1 person	13,079	14,879	16,261	16,362	18,999
2 persons	16,282	18,523	20,243	20,369	23,652
3 persons	20,016	22,771	24,886	25,041	29,078
4 persons	24,303	27,648	30,216	30,404	35,304
5 persons	27,564	31,358	34,270	34,482	40,042
6 persons	31,088	35,367	38,652	38,892	45,160
7 or more persons	34,612	39,376	43,033	43,300	50,279

Source: (Statistics Canada, 2006)

Using LICO, the poverty rate for Canadian single mothers has hovered between 55% and 60% over the last decade and a half (Ross et al., 2000). Statistics reveal that the single parents living in poverty tend to have low education levels, and that education levels are linked to poverty. Education is still key to escaping poverty; “in 1997, only 7.7 per cent of Canadian families with an adult university graduate were poor, compared to 20.5 per cent of those families in which the highest level of an adult member's education was less than nine years of schooling.”(Ross et al., 2000, p. xxii). The *Canadian Fact Book on Poverty* presents a profile of Canadian poverty and concludes the following for lone parent mothers:

The facts show that the big differences between poor and non-poor lone parent mothers are in age and educational attainment. Poor lone-parent mothers are younger and have less formal education. If society cannot provide these young mothers with both the means to pursue their own educational goals and a supportive environment in which to raise their children, the future for these families is bleak (p. 157).

Tables 4 through 7 and Figure 1 further illustrate the reality of the above statement as well as the difference between aboriginal single mothers and other Canadian single mothers. I use both LICO rates and mean incomes to report the differences between the various parental groupings.

Generally, almost half (48.5%) of all single mothers have incomes below the LICO. This rate is slightly lower than some of the rates in the literature; the reason is likely because I only included single mothers 15 through 54 years of age with at least one child under the age of 15 living at home. There is substantial variation within different groupings of single mothers. Overall the rate for Aboriginal single mothers is 62.9% but it is the youngest and the least educated in both groups that are the poorest. Table 4 indicates that the trend for both Aboriginal and other Canadian single mothers is that the younger they are, the poorer they are. In the youngest group, the gap between Aboriginal and other Canadian groups is quite narrow (about 5%) with the highest gap (about 20%) found in the 35-44 age group.

Even larger variation is found in LICO rates according to education levels as indicated in Table 5. Surprising is that the highest rate (78.4%) is not in the Aboriginal population but actually belongs to the approximately 17,000 other Canadian single

mothers who have less than a grade 9 education. Not surprisingly, the lowest rate (23.8%) belongs to the almost 14,000 other Canadian single mothers with University degrees.

Table 4: Percentage of Single Mothers with Income below LICO by Age

Age Categories	Aboriginal	Other Canadian
15-24	67.4	62.4
25-34	63.5	54.4
35-44	61	41.3
45-54	52.2	35.9

Source: Statistics Canada (2001) Note: Subset of single mothers 15 through 54 years of age with at least one child under the age of 15 living at home.

Table 5: Percentage of Single Mothers with Income below LICO by Education

Education Categories	Aboriginal	Other Canadian
Less than grade 9	58.1	78.4
Grades 9-13	70.1	57.6
Post-secondary not University degree	58.5	43
University degree	42.6	23.8

Source: Statistics Canada (2001) Note: Subset of single mothers 15 through 54 years of age with at least one child under the age of 15 living at home.

Table 6 shows mean income, which is another way of looking at the economic circumstances of single mothers. Overall the mean income for Aboriginal single mothers is \$17,948 and for other Canadian single mothers is \$25,957. Mean incomes are presented according to age groupings (Table 6) and education level groupings (Table 7).

Table 6: Mean Income of Single Mothers by Age

Age Categories	Aboriginal	Other Canadian
15-24	10,077	12,351
25-34	18,975	22,052
35-44	22,154	29,795
45-54	21,390	33,435

Source: Statistics Canada (2001) Note: Subset of single mothers 15 through 54 years of age with at least one child under the age of 15 living at home.

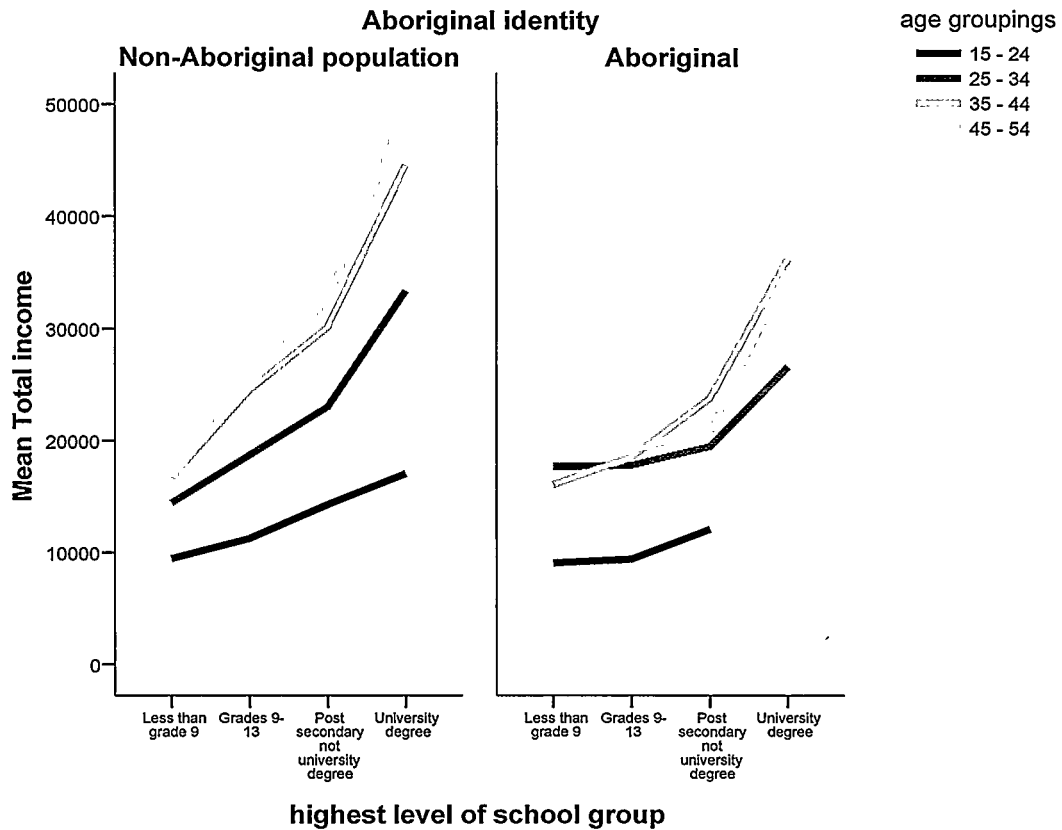
Table 7: Average Income of Single Mothers by Education

Educational attainment	Aboriginal	Other Canadian
Less than grade 9	15,652	15,153
Grades 9-13	20,224	14,822
Post-secondary not University degree	26,559	20,044
University degree	42,787	32,791

Source: Statistics Canada (2001) Note: Subset of single mothers 15 through 54 years of age with at least one child under the age of 15 living at home.

Figure 1 illustrates income by age grouping and educational level. The trend is clear; the more educated and the older a single mother is, the higher her income is likely to be.

Figure 1: Average Income of Single Mothers by Education and Age



Education

The general distribution of single mothers by educational attainment is reported in Table 8. Single mothers, both aboriginal and other Canadians, are represented at all education levels. Proportionally, however, Aboriginal mothers are over-represented in the lowest educational level and under-represented at the highest educational level.

Table 8: Distribution of Single Mothers by level of Education:

Count and within group percentage	Aboriginal	Other Canadian
Less than grade 9	3,868 (8.3%)	21,078 (4.0%)
Grades 9-13	19,952 (42.8%)	179,162 (34.3%)
Post-secondary not University degree	21,034 (45.1%)	264,517 (50.7%)
University degree	1,745 (3.7%)	57,317 (11.0%)

Source: Statistics Canada (2001) Note: Subset of single mothers 15 through 54 years of age with at least one child under the age of 15 living at home.

The general distribution of other mothers (married and common-law combined) by educational attainment is reported in Table 9. Generally, single mothers are a less educated group compared to married mothers, except in the lowest education level for Aboriginal mothers where Aboriginal mothers who are married are even more over-represented in the lowest educational level than aboriginal single mothers.

Table 9: Distribution of Other Mothers by level of Education

Count and within group percentage	Aboriginal	Other Canadian
Less than grade 9	8,169 (10.2%)	65,989 (2.6%)
Grades 9-13	29,968 (37.4%)	738,086 (29.1%)
Post-secondary not University degree	36,947 (46.2%)	1,187,575 (46.8%)
University degree	4,965 (6.2%)	548,261 (21.6%)

Source: Statistics Canada (2001) Note: Subset of married and common-law mothers 15 through 54 years of age with at least one child under the age of 15 living at home.

When education is examined according to age some interesting patterns emerge. The 15-24 year age group displays the least amount of difference according to type of mother and according to Aboriginal status. For the most educated group, single mothers

are consistently under-represented compared to their married or common-law counterparts. However the gap narrows as they age for both Aboriginal and other Canadian mothers. Although this data is snapshot data, it does hint that all mothers, but especially single mothers, continue to upgrade their education.

Participation in Education

Although poverty statistics for Canadian single mothers are profoundly disturbing, it is the relationship between poverty and educational attainment that represents hope. Single mothers are participating in education. In a 20-year longitudinal survey of 716 mothers in Nova Scotia who gave birth to their first child in 1978, Dechman (2000b) reports that single mothers pursue educational studies at the same rate as other mothers. Overall, 64% of the women in her survey took some type of additional education or training after becoming a mother. More recent studies (Hull, 2001; Kapsalis & Tourigny, 2002) and the data in this profile reveal that single mothers actually participate in education at much higher rates than married mothers.

Table 11 indicates that Aboriginal mothers are more likely to be enrolled in school full time (17.1% of single mothers and 9.6% of married mothers) than other Canadian mothers (9.5% for single mothers and 2.6% of married mothers) and it is the poorest group, Aboriginal single mothers, who has the highest levels of participation in education. Table 12 indicates the trend that the older the single mother the less likely she will be enrolled in school full-time.

Table 10: Distribution of Mothers by Education and Age

	15 – 24 years of age				25 – 34 years of age			
	Aboriginal		Other Canadian		Aboriginal		Other Canadian	
	Single	Other	Single	Other	Single	Other	Single	Other
	Mother	Mother	Mother	Mother	Mother	Mother	Mother	Mother
Less than grade 9	6.9	6.7	4.5	3.9	7.2	7.6	3.7	2.4
Grades 9-13	67.5	63.1	58.3	52.2	37.8	35.1	33.3	27.2
Post Secondary not University Degree	25.6	30.2	36.0	40.7	51.8	51.2	55.5	50.2
University Degree	0.0	0.0	1.3	3.2	3.3	6.0	7.5	20.1

	35 – 44 years of age				45 – 54 years of age			
	Aboriginal		Other Canadian		Aboriginal		Other Canadian	
	Single	Other	Single	Other	Single	Other	Single	Other
	Mother	Mother	Mother	Mother	Mother	Mother	Mother	Mother
Less than grade 9	9.1	11.2	3.6	2.3	15.8	23.0	6.2	4.1
Grades 9-13	33.3	33.2	31.2	29.4	26.3	27.0	26.1	25.8
Post Secondary not University Degree	51.4	48.0	52.1	46.2	49.6	39.3	45.6	40.8
University Degree	6.3	7.5	13.1	22.1	8.4	10.7	22.2	29.4

Source: Statistics Canada (2001) Note: Subset of mothers 15 through 54 years of age with at least one child under the age of 15 living at home.

Table 11: Percentage of Mothers Attending School (full-time, part-time)

	Aboriginal	Other Canadian
% married mothers attending school full-time	9.6	2.6
% single mothers attending school full-time	17.1	9.5
% married mothers attending school part-time	6.4	6.3
% single mothers attending school part-time	8.5	8.3

Source: Statistics Canada (2001) Note: Subset of mothers 15 through 54 years of age with at least one child under the age of 15 living at home.

Table 12: Percentage of Single Mothers Attending School Full-time

	Aboriginal	Other Canadian
15-24	26.3	25.4
25-34	17.8	10.8
35-44	11.8	6.0
45-54	4.2	3.9

Source: Statistics Canada (2001) Note: Subset of single mothers 15 through 54 years of age with at least one child under the age of 15 living at home.

Research concerning single mothers: Some of it helps – Some of it hinders

Research concerning single mothers, especially low-income single mothers, often has a stated purpose related to improving social conditions for this group. In this section I will argue that some research respects and serves this group well by indicating the barriers faced whereas other research perpetuates the myths and stereotypes and does very little to serve this group. While post-secondary education may present its own barriers to single mothers, especially low-income single mothers, those who have had the opportunity to attend overwhelmingly indicate that education is an important part of the

solution (Adair, 2001, 2003; Adair & Dahlberg, 2003; Bashevkin, 2002; Bloom, 2001; Buechner, 1996; Christopher, 2005; Harris, 2003; Holyfield, 2002; hooks, 1994a; Jennings, 2004; Sidel, 2006).

The 1996 welfare reform initiatives in the United States made post-secondary education much less accessible to single mothers on welfare. These changes seem to have provoked a number of scholars, mostly single mothers who had benefited from collecting welfare while attending school, to write about it. Sociologist Adair (2001) led the way with her article, *Poverty and the (Broken) Promise of Higher Education* published in the *Harvard Educational Review* and later, in the book she and Sandra Dahlberg (Adair & Dahlberg, 2003) co-edited. The book is a powerful collection of articles written by thirteen different low-income single mothers, most of whom are now academics and all of whom were once low-income single mother and students. Some of the chapters focus on barriers within educational systems, but all recognize education as a solution to the poverty and stereotypes faced by low-income single mothers. In the introduction Adair and Dahlberg write:

The women who have contributed to this collection are also associated with higher education and view its structure, culture, and policies from the vantage point of poverty. Although we recognize that education is not a unilateral solution to poverty, we also know that we have survived and positively changed our lives and those of our families through the process and products of post-secondary education. Most of us survived in an environment that sought to exclude, punish, and vilify us because we were poor. We are living proof of both the pejorative

power of public policy based on stereotypes of poor women and the liberating and revolutionary potential of higher education. (p. 2)

The book *Moving Up and Out: Poverty, Education and the Single Parent Family* reports on research obtained from 53 low-income single mothers who were recipients of small scholarships to attend post-secondary education from a privately funded program in Washington County, Arkansas (Holyfield, 2002). Holyfield herself was an early recipient of the scholarship program. This study clearly indicates the extent of the poverty and barriers these women faced and the positive influence that post-secondary education had on their lives and those of their family members. Holyfield also acknowledges that many of the single mothers in Arkansas who participated in her research could not have completed their education under current welfare laws and the limitations imposed by welfare reform.

Harris (2003) clearly indicates the ways in which the *welfare queen* stereotype demeans, condemns, and alienates and how important education and being a student was to her struggle against that stereotype:

Even as I began to identify myself as a single mother, I am conscious of the ways in which my mind is processing how I should preface or qualify the title with redeeming characteristics: I am a poor single mother, but I am also a student... if I can say that I am a welfare mother but I am also a student, then maybe I can write myself back into social acceptance. (p.138)

Other studies published in the United States that illuminate barriers for single mothers and discuss education as part of the solution include Christopher (2005), Jennings (2004),

and Zhan and Pandey (2004). All of these studies are in some way responding to the 1996 welfare reforms that limit access to education for low-income single mothers.

Dramatic changes to policies that address income security occurred in Canada during the 1990s as well. Similar to the United States, welfare reform in Canada also focused on a “welfare to work” approach which often does not meet the needs of low-income single mothers (Bashevkin, 2002). Breitzkreuz (2005) reports that “low-income lone mothers are particularly at risk because their labour-market attachment is unstable and low-paying” (p. 152). Many of the provincially administered welfare programs of the late 1990s aimed to move welfare recipients rapidly into the labour market. A survey of single parents receiving assistance through one of these programs in Toronto, *Ontario Works*, indicates the inappropriateness of this type of program for single parents (Toronto Social Services, 2004).

A program that encourages single parents to move rapidly into the labour market without adequately helping them to address the multiple obstacles they are confronting will have little ongoing success. Instead, programs of this nature are more apt to result in a cycling pattern as single parents transition between social assistance and marginal employment opportunities. (p. 23)

The survey revealed that single parents face multiple obstacles to employment and a lack of education/skills was near the top of the list of obstacles that single parents faced.

While welfare reform in the United States provoked a substantial response in academic literature concerning access to education for welfare recipients, the Canadian literature, including much of that which critiques welfare reform, seldom addressed the issue of access to post-secondary education for single mothers. Also, despite the strong

evidence that poverty and education levels are linked, very few Canadian studies concerning single mothers seem to focus on education levels, or pay very much attention to the many single mothers who are students. Nor do these studies discuss, in any detail, education as part of the solution to the extreme poverty rates within this group. Below, two studies are discussed that profile Canadian single mothers and their treatment of the issue of education.

Hull (2001) offers comprehensive reporting on education levels and education participation rates, and highlights the statistical differences between Aboriginal single mothers and non-Aboriginal single mothers. Many of his discussions concerning education continue to focus on the prevalence of single parenthood according to education level, rather than on access to education or the relationship between education and poverty. Education is not discussed in the summary although some discussion does appear in the conclusion. His statement, “One of the strengths of Aboriginal single mothers is their willingness to upgrade their education by attending school as mature adults” (p. 106), implies that all that is needed is a willingness and gives little appreciation to the barriers that these women face. Hull, like many others studying single mothers, seems to be fixated on their prevalence of single mothers and finding a solution that would reduce the prevalence of single mother families rather than improve the social conditions within this family structure. Hull at least is curious enough to report and question some of his findings and does recognize the need for longitudinal studies of their situation.

A seemingly promising Canadian study *Profiles and Transitions of Groups at Risk of Social Exclusion: Lone Parent* (Kapsalis & Tourigny, 2002) was prepared for

Human Resources Development Canada and using 1993-1998 longitudinal data from the Survey of Labour and Income. The abstract includes the following statement: “This study attempts to answer the question – Why do some lone parents escape low-income or never enter spells of low-income or social assistance, while others remain in low-income or on social assistance for many years” (p. i). Unfortunately, this 68-page report, which is readily available on a number of government websites, focuses on what appears to be the authors’ biased view that single mothers should marry or just work more hours if they want to exit poverty.

I have chosen to highlight this report because it exemplifies the type of research that has the potential to be harmful to low-income single mothers wanting to improve the situations of their families. This report was paid for, accepted by, and is used by government. Throughout the report statistics appear in tables are later ignored or contradicted throughout the report. At the beginning of the section, *Labour Market Activity and Low Income*, for example, the following is highlighted and boxed out:

Low income among lone mothers is mostly the result of low hours of work. For example, if all lone mothers worked at least 1750 hours annually (the average for non-low-income working mother), their low-income rate would have dropped from 39% to 8 %. (p.19)

There is no indication of how this key finding was calculated and it is hard to believe it could be accurate considering some of the other statistics contained in the report. For example: The paper states that, on average, in 1998 low-income single mothers made less than half the hourly wage (\$8.13) of other single mothers (\$16.59) (Kapsalis & Tourigny, 2002, p. 20). It also states that the 1998 low-income cut-off for two persons, the

minimum size of a single mother family, was \$17,705 (p. 20). So if the average low-income earner works 1750 hours at \$8.13/hr that person's before tax income will be \$14,227.50 which still places the average earner well below the low-income cut off. If the average earner is low-income, how can the low-income rate possibly drop from 39% to 8%?

Other examples of biased and inaccurate reporting include the boxing out and highlighting of the following statement directly under the heading *Duration of Social Assistance*:

Over the period 1993-98, 58% of lone mothers received SA [social assistance] at least once, while 41% of SA recipients were on SA all six years. The average “in-progress” spell of those who received SA in 1993 was 4.3 years – the longest for any type of family. (Kapsalis & Tourigny, 2002, p. 47)

On the very next page, in Table 9.5, the authors list the average “in-progress” spells (referring to the time spent on social assistance) for female SA (social assistance) recipients (p. 48). These ranged from 3.8 years to 4.4 years, depending on family type. I would argue that numbers that close do not warrant pulling one out and highlighting it. And the longest average “in progress” SA spell of 4.4 years actually belongs to the “female SA recipient of the couple with kids <18” category rather than the female lone parent category.

Kapsalis and Tourigny (2002) seem to be fixated on what is referred to as a “change in family status” which refers to no longer being a single mother, and any favourable influences of education are repeatedly discounted. The next section,

Determinants of the Duration of Social Assistance, starts by boxing out and highlighting the following statement:

The three strongest factors associated with longer SA spells in 1993-98 were: (a) no change in family status; (b) being a recent immigrant, disabled, or Aboriginal; and (c) having a pre-school age child. Interestingly, the level of education did not appear to have an influence. (Kapsalis & Tourigny, 2002, p. 49)

This conclusion does not at all match the data in Tables 9.6, 9.7 and 9.8 from which it is supposedly drawn. Contrary to the assertions of the report, the findings clearly indicate that education has almost as much influence as change in family status. For example, the length of average in-progress spell for those with university education (3.8 years) is very close to the average for those that had a change in family status (3.7 years). Similarly, the duration on SA for those with only a high school education (4.7 years) is not so very different from those who did not have a change in family status (4.9 years). When reporting the median spell expected of a new SA spell, the duration for those with a post-secondary degree is (1.8 years) and students (1.6 years) were not so very different from the calculation for those with a change in family status (1.5 years) and those with only high school education (3.3 years) were very close to those with no change in family status of 3.2 years.

I do not know what influences were at play when Kapsalis and Tourigny (2002) conducted and documented this study. Did government policy dictate the way this report was written or were the authors trying to influence government policy? Either way, government reports are influential and used by those responsible for developing public policy in Canada. As noted, this report can be easily found on a number of government

websites and it is used as a resource by others studying single mothers. The authors acknowledge six academics and senior government staff who reviewed it, but I was not able to find any discussion of the flaws that I identified in the report.

The above example raises the question whether the negative stereotypes about single mothers are so widely accepted in Canada and so embedded in public policy that few people recognize how harmful this type of reporting can be to the single mothers and their families who want to improve their social and economic situations. Moreover, the lack of attention paid in the Canadian literature to single mothers attending post-secondary education may also indicate the influence of the stereotypical attitude that single mothers are not smart, or are too lazy, or somehow do not deserve higher education.

CHAPTER 2: METHODS

This chapter describes the methodology of the study and states the problem and purpose of the study. The design of the study is outlined including participant selection, the role of the researcher, ethics, document review, and interview protocol. Next, the descriptive, interpretative and analytical approaches are discussed and the validity, limitations and significance of the study are outlined.

Problem Statement: Life as a Canadian Single Mother

I suggest that, because of the social conditions they face, single mothers in Canada experience oppression. For this research, oppression is defined as:

the unjustifiable placing of a burden on someone or some group, by interfering with their powers, interests, or opportunities. Oppression may be deliberate, or an unintended outcome of social arrangements; it may be recognized for what it is, or may go unremarked even by those oppressed (Blackburn, 2005).

Negative stereotypes and harmful myths associated with single mothers are prolific and promulgated through the media and public policy forums (Bashevkin, 2002; Ganong & Coleman, 1995). Statistics paint a grim picture of the social conditions of Canadian single mothers, especially Aboriginal single parent mothers (Hull, 2001; Ross et al., 2000). When looked at as a group, single mothers experience low education levels and very high poverty rates (Ross et al., 2000). While some research concerning this group is helpful, other studies are conducted and written in such a way that they are more likely to perpetuate the myths and exacerbate problems for low-income single mothers.

This research explores post-secondary education as a possible solution to some of the oppression that low-income single mothers face. Single mothers work very hard to

resist the poor social conditions and the stereotypical single mother image. This study identifies resistance as a strategy used by single mothers to successfully participate in post-secondary education programs. Furthermore, it honours that resistance – a resistance that can help a low-income single mother become a highly motivated post-secondary student.

Purpose of the Study

The general purpose of this study is to document the paths that my participant single mothers followed in order to achieve academic success. More specifically, the purpose is to identify evidence of their resistance to the poverty and stereotypes associated with single mothers and explore how that resistance might have contributed to their success.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this study:

1. What post-secondary educational path did each of these single mothers follow?
2. Is there evidence of resistance to the poverty and stereotypes associated with single mothers and, if so, how did that resistance contribute to their academic success?

Qualitative Study

Statisticians and social scientists, through the use of quantitative methods, have identified and communicated the problem of high poverty and low education levels for Canadian single mothers. If a positive difference is to be made then I believe the “experts” we need to turn to are the single mothers themselves who have successfully

completed post-secondary education programs. I believe their experiences and stories are rich with insights. Once collected as data, analysed and shared, their experiences could help other single parents move out of poverty and reject the stereotypes that diminish their lives. A qualitative approach to inquiry is best suited to capture and find meaning within the rich human experiences of participants (Creswell, 1998; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Gay & Airasian, 2003).

Collective Case Study

This is a collective case study shaped also by biographical research methods. The following definitions of case study are used to frame the approach I followed:

1. A case study requires setting temporal limits: “This bounded system is bounded by time and place, and it is the case being studied—a program, an event, an activity, or individuals” (Creswell, 1998, p. 61). This study involves individuals’ post-secondary education program experiences, bounded by the time in their lives when they were single parents and by the places they lived during those times.
2. “Multiple sources of information include observations, interview, audio-visual material, and documents and reports” (Creswell, 1998, p. 61). This study relies predominantly on interview material and focuses predominantly on participants’ post-secondary education experiences. Government documents and reports are used to define the context of the case.
3. “The context of the case involves situating the case within its setting, which may be a physical setting or the social, historical, and/or economic setting for the case” (Creswell, 1998, p. 61). This study is about poverty and stereotypes and resistance

through education, and, thus, the context of the case is the Canadian social and economic setting.

4. External validity is improved, and interpretive and theoretical opportunities are increased with multiple cases (Merriam, 1998). When more than one case is studied, it may be referred to as a collective case study (Stake, 1995). This study involves six cases.
5. Merriam (1998) classifies case studies as descriptive, interpretive or evaluative. This research is situated in both the descriptive and interpretive categories. *Chapter 3: Participants' Stories* contains the descriptive material in the format of biographical accounts of each participant's story while *Chapter 4: Research Findings* relies more on an interpretive approach.

Although I have chosen first to characterize this research as a collective case study, the data have many qualities that are inherently biographical and, thus, the data collection and analysis was influenced by biographical methodologies. Creswell (1998) differentiates between the *classical* biography and *interpretive* biography. This study leans toward the interpretive biography because, while I verified their stories with the participants, I also recognize that I influenced both the process and the final presentation of the study including the development of the characters, their stories and their meanings.

Participant Selection

This study required what Merriam (1998) refers to as purposeful or criterion based selection. She suggests that this type of sampling begins with the researcher developing the criteria or list of attributes that are essential to the study. The requirements for participation in this study and the rationale for those requirements are as follows:

1. I chose only to involve women who had experienced poverty as defined by the LICO (Low Income Cut-Off) developed by Statistics Canada (Ross et al., 2000) and who had remained single parents while they attended and successfully completed at least one post-secondary education program. Moreover, this study is focused on the poverty and stereotypes associated with single mothers; therefore, I chose not to engage participants who had only briefly been single parents or who had not experienced poverty.
2. I purposely included two Aboriginal participants. This was done because poor social and economic conditions are even more pronounced for Canadian Aboriginal single mothers. Also, the study is set in the Yukon where 24% of the population self-identifies as Aboriginal and 33% of the Yukon's poor single mothers are of Aboriginal ancestry (Lone Parent Detail: Yukon Yukon Bureau of Statistics, 2004).
3. This study does not include single fathers because single fathers do not experience the poverty or stereotypes that single mother's experience. Poverty rates for single fathers are very close to those found in the general population (Statistics Canada, 2000). Although they, too, may be subject to stereotypes, these are not the same as those that cause barriers to single mothers.
4. All participants successfully completed a post-secondary program of at least 12 weeks duration at an institution recognized by the Canada Student Loan system. This was done to ensure consistency and to avoid complicating the study with barriers that may be associated with less mainstream educational endeavours.

Participants who fit these criteria were recruited through what Merriam (1998) refers to as snowball, chain or network sampling. This strategy involves identifying participants

and allowing them to identify other participants who might be good interview subjects. I directly invited two participants to participate in this study. Four subsequently approached me after hearing about my research from other participants or from people I had told about my research.

Role of the Researcher

Like the women in this study, I was once a low-income single mother who returned to school. I enjoyed my academic journeys and have encouraged other single mothers to pursue post-secondary education. I am biased in that I believe post-secondary education is important and I know it improved and maybe even saved my life (See also *Chapter One: My Story, my Bias*). I believe that my positive attitude and insider status helped to foster enthusiasm and promote trust and sharing with the participants.

Stringer (1999) points out, and I agree, that the researcher must ensure that explanatory frameworks are sufficiently rigorous to move people past stereotypical or simplistic interpretations of their situations, but they must also be grounded in the reality of their everyday lives. So although the explanatory framework relating oppression and resistance can be gleaned from their stories, participants themselves did not directly explain their experiences within that frame.

Ethics

The comprehensive guidelines of the University of Calgary with regard to ethics guided my research and formal approval from the University Ethics Committee was granted prior to engaging in any research activity with any participants.

I minimized risk by maintaining the confidentiality of all participants throughout the process. I engaged them in data verifications and made it clear that they could, at any

time, withdraw from the research and reclaim any or all of the information that I gathered from them.

Document Review

Document review was limited to the social, political and educational context of the study, including government documents that described or evaluated social assistance and student financial assistance programs. I did not review any documents relating specifically to any of the participants.

Interview Protocol

I interviewed each participant individually. The interviews ranged in duration from 45 minutes to 75 minutes in length. I heeded the advice of Carspecken (1996) to be well prepared but definitely not scripted.

I performed a pilot interview as part of a graduate seminar on qualitative methods where I tested a conversational storytelling type of approach to interviewing. This approach worked well and I used it with all six participants. I started the interview by saying:

I want to hear all about your back-to-school process, when and why it happened, how you feel about it, what obstacles you faced and where you found support. How did it affect you and your family? I wonder if you would be okay with trying an informal story-telling format where we would let it flow.

I let the participants know I had written out a series of questions, should we want or need them. The story-telling format worked very well and I found that by the end of the interviews the participants had answered almost all of my questions without my having to specifically ask them. This approach minimized my interference with their

story. Sometimes I can be perceived as forceful, a characteristic that I wanted to minimize in an interview situation. The story-telling “flow” type of approach turned out to be an excellent way to mitigate that characteristic.

Interview questions

Following are the written questions that were reviewed at the end of each interview:

Before the experience:

1. What was their previous experience of school like?
2. Were they struggling before going back to school and, if so, what did that struggle include?
3. What motivated them to make the decision to return to school?
4. Was the process of returning to school gradual or sudden?
5. What barriers did they face? (i.e., school, government, family, friends, other)
6. What support did they receive? (i.e., school, government, family, friends, other)

During the experience:

1. What was the type and duration of program(s) they attended?
2. What did a typical week look like? Was it difficult or easy? In what ways?
3. How well did they succeed academically?
4. What motivated them the most?
5. How did they manage financially?
6. What barriers did they face? (i.e., school, government, family, friends, other)
7. What support did they receive? (i.e., school, government, family, friends, other)
8. How did their child(ren) react?

After the experience:

1. Was it worth it to return to school? emotionally? financially?
2. How has the experience changed them and their families?
3. Are they continuing to pursue education? Do they ever think about returning to school full time?
4. What advice do they have for other single parents thinking of going back to school?
5. What advice do they have for social or student financial assistance agencies wanting to assist single parents returning to school?
6. What does being a single mother mean to them?
7. How do they think single mothers are perceived in our society?

Recording

All the interviews were recorded using a tape recording device, transcribed verbatim, stored in password protected files on my personal computer and, finally, backed up on CD. Transcriptions were shared with all participants except one participant who could not be located. Each participant was invited to review the transcript of her interview and request that changes be made. None of the participants requested any changes to their transcriptions.

Descriptive biography: Participants' Stories

Chapter 3 contains six mini-biographies, one for each of the participants. Too many times I have come away from reading qualitative research studies frustrated to have been thrown into the researcher's analysis and interpretation of their participants' stories without any real introduction to the participants. For me, it would feel rude and disrespectful to just jump right into "picking their stories apart" for the purpose of my

argument. These women are truly amazing in their accomplishments. They have come from impoverished backgrounds, succeeded at a variety of post-secondary programs and gone on to have fulfilling family lives and become successful lawyers, teachers and public administrators. For me, an important component of this research was to honour them by telling, albeit briefly, their stories.

Wolcott (2001) advises that when writing up qualitative research that a researcher should strive to start and finish the descriptive account before moving on to analysis and interpretation. The approach I took with these mini-biographies helped me to achieve this. Each story was written as a mini-biography rich with quotes from the participant. I have tried to write each one as a descriptive account rather than interjecting any interpretation or analysis of their situation. That said, I alone chose which parts of the interview to highlight and those choices were definitely influenced by the purpose of the study.

I followed the following pattern to create each of the mini-biographies:

1. Transcribe entire interview
2. Version One: cull the interviewer and any totally non-relevant material
3. Version Two: reorganize her words into a chronology of: before school, during school and reflections or after school. Also clean up the repetition, ums and ahs, etc.
4. Version three: Highlight outstanding quotes and set aside these files as the data for the interpretive and analytical phase.
5. Version Four: Use version two and reduce it to 3 - 5 pages of interview data.

6. Version Five: Change it to a third person description, rich with quotes from the participant.

Interpretation and Analysis

While I was influenced by Wolcott (2001) and tried to stick to the descriptive before engaging in interpretation, I do not want to give the impression that I waited until I had all my data collected and the mini-biographies written before I engaged in any type of interpretive or analytical thought or activities. I agree that the right way to analyze data in a qualitative study is to do it simultaneously with data collection (Merriam, 1998). This study evolved through a continuous looping and crossing back and forth between data collection, description, interpretation and analysis.

During the data collection phase

After each interview I prepared a set of quick notes for that participant. This was usually only one typewritten page of highlights or epiphanies about the participant's story and twice included a bit of dialogue that occurred after the tape recorder had been turned off.

During the transcription phase I kept a "what I am finding" file open, and in it I recorded what I saw as the expected and unexpected results.

I also talked quite a bit about my research to whomever would listen. Some might say that I talked too long and should have started writing earlier, and that is probably a fair assessment. The talking did, however, help me to sort out what was relevant, interesting and important about this research.

Data Management

Reid as cited in Merriam (1998) outlines three phases of data management: data preparation, data identification, and data manipulation.

The first phase of data management is referred to as data preparation and “its purpose is merely to create a clean record from which to work” (Merriam, 1998). I prepared and set aside a slightly cleaned up version of each interview transcript as part of the preparation of the individual participant biographies.

The second phase of data identification is meant to divide the data into analytically meaningful and easily locatable segments (Merriam, 1998). For the individual biographies this was achieved through a continuous culling of each of the interview data sets down to manageable 3-5 pages. For the collective interpretation and analysis I choose to follow the advice of Wolcott (2001) and write my research findings in combination with what would normally be a separate literature review.

I divided the data and created separate files for each of the themes I would be writing about: critical pedagogy (Freire, 1973; hooks, 1994a), resistance (Wade, 2003) and evidence in other studies. When reading the data for this task I was generous in what I included. I did what Mason (1996) refers to as a literal reading and an interpretive reading of the data. Some data constituted evidence in themselves in a literal or circumstantial sense and some of the data represented evidence of something else in an interpretive or significant sense.

For the third phase, data manipulation, I worked with each of the theme-based data files. This phase was a continuous back and forth writing and analysing exercise. Mason (1996) describes three approaches to developing theory: theory first, theory last or

the one that I think is most suited to my research project where “Theory, data generation and data analysis are developed simultaneously in a dialectical process. If you are developing theory in this way, you will devise a method for moving back and forth between data analysis and the process of explanation or theory construction” (Mason, 1996, p. 141).

Although it ended up being a somewhat messy back and forth process, I did apply the following structure to this phase:

1. I reread anything I had previously written on the theme and gathered some of my most influential citations from the literature and placed them at the top of the theme data file;
2. I highlighted the data that jumped out as possible verbatim quotes;
3. I looked for other possible discussion items and made notes at the top of each theme file; and
4. I started writing. Then I circled back to the data files and the literature as necessary to build my discussion for each theme.

Validity

With respect to validity in biography, Denzin, as cited in (Creswell, 1998), suggests that a focus on how the account is written is most important:

The meanings of these experiences are best given by the persons who experience them; thus, a preoccupation with method, validity, reliability, generalizability, and theoretical relevance of biographical method must be set aside in favour of a concern for meaning and interpretation. (Creswell, 1998, p. 205)

I provided all participants with a copy of their story and asked them to review it and let me know if I represented them honestly and fairly. I planned to revise or rewrite these accounts according to their instructions, but no requests for revisions were made.

Limitations

Each country, and, to some degree each region within a country, has unique social contexts. This study is set in the Yukon and all the participants were Yukon residents, although some of their educational experiences took place elsewhere. The Yukon social context is influenced and shaped by the national social context but also has unique characteristics of its own. This study should be able to generally inform the Canadian situation and parts of it may more specifically inform the Yukon situation.

The social context—for example, social assistance, student financial assistance, post-secondary program entrance requirements, costs of living—changes over time. This study is bound by time and, as such, must be viewed vis-à-vis its 2004/2005 time frame and the time frames that span the single parents' stories.

No efforts were made to find a representative sample of single mothers. All of these women were single parents for at least six months before, during, and at least six months after at least one of their post-secondary educational programs; further, all of these women had experienced poverty before they successfully completed post-secondary educational programs.

No effort was made to generalize these results. The focus was on each participant's own unique success story. Their stories were first told and then analyzed for evidence of resistance as well as other factors that may have contributed to their success.

Significance

This study provides an opportunity for participants to share, reflect upon, make sense of, and celebrate their successes. I am hopeful that, in some small way, the telling of their stories will help dispel some of the negative stereotypes that haunt and serve to oppress this group. This study could inform social and student financial assistance policies and programs that have single mothers as their clients. It will contribute to academic literature by adding to a neglected area of study—Canadian single mothers attending post-secondary education—and it represents one of the needed “steps toward ensuring that education remains a truly democratic project that has the potential for enacting social change and fostering economic equity” (Adair, 2001, p. 237).

CHAPTER 3: PARTICIPANT STORIES

The accomplishments of each of the women I interviewed are truly amazing. As single parents they overcame a number of obstacles to attend and succeed at a variety of post-secondary programs. They have gone on to have fulfilling family lives and become successful lawyers, teachers and public administrators. An important component of this research was, for me, to honour them by telling, albeit briefly, their stories. The stories are presented herein the same order that the interviews were conducted.

Freda: Law School was the Answer

Freda's marriage ended in 1974 when she was 24 years old and her only child, Tara, was two years old. She could no longer rely on her husband for economic stability. She had an undergraduate liberal arts degree with no particular focus. Freda described the year after she separated:

I spent a year sort of going from job to job. I'd had a part-time job at The Bay and all these horrible silly jobs. I think it was the first time in my life I really had to get serious—think—my God I have to support myself and someone else what am I going to do with myself? To use the sailing analogy, I had been sailing around; I think having a daughter gave me kind of a rudder or even an anchor—something that stabilized me or forced me to stabilize my life a bit.

Her primary motivation for looking into law school was income security to allow her to raise her daughter but she also said she needed something that would hold her interest.

Freda described her back-to-school decision process:

It was a period of time when a lot of women were going into law school and I was involved in the feminist movement. I went to meetings and we had a women's center. So I knew three or four women who were either in law school or thinking about going and law school sounded interesting.

For Freda the role models she was exposed to were key. She said, "in order to conceptualize myself in a certain role I have to see other people in it, especially other women about my age." She said that she had a very high reading capacity and it was one of the things that she had always liked to do. As she put it, "I was interested in issues of social justice which feminism had opened up for me and I thought I bet I can do that. I bet you anything I could do that, and then I wrote the LSAT exam." She scored very well on that exam.

Freda said she did not view her family as supportive. She did not even tell her family she was applying to law school; "if I didn't get accepted, I didn't want them to know I had applied and have another excuse to see me as a failure. I don't find my family very supportive in that way. Very critical, very competitive." Freda's mother made it clear that she did not want to "babysit" and, with Freda, she took the "you made your bed, you lie in it" type of approach.

Freda's ex-husband was supposed to pay half of Tara's expenses, and what he paid helped, but every year he became less and less reliable. Freda said that she was "reluctant to go to court or any of that kind of thing, mostly because of how taxing it would be on my state of mind. I didn't want to get into a big conflict." Freda said she knew she had to stay focused on her schoolwork.

Freda said she felt that she was very much on her own:

I could ask for favours from people from time to time but really there was nobody I could rely on. I had to rely entirely on myself. It is not a bad thing to feel that you have to rely on yourself; it forces you to draw on all the resources that you have got. It sort of forces you to focus and get rid of all fantasies and nonsense and get right down to what can I actually do and then do it.

Freda did not consider her need to find the finances for her schooling as a barrier. “I just figured I’d get a student loan and it was at least as much money as what I was earning at these part-time low-end jobs. She “could squeeze a penny ‘til it screamed.” Once she got accepted, she applied for a student loan and she also had \$500 to \$750 in annual bursaries from the law school. The student loans officer advised her that she could apply for social assistance and that she would probably get more money on social assistance, but she “had this absolute terror of falling into the social welfare trap and never being able to get out. I saw it as like a lobster trap.” She did not apply.

Even though Freda said she had an extreme fear of the welfare trap, she also said she didn’t mind being a poor student: “We were part of a peer group where nobody had a lot of extra money. No one was going out to gourmet dinners and stuff. People had pot lucks.” Freda said she didn’t spend any money on drinking, one of the big expenses for some students, because she was at home with her daughter.

It’s amazing how little money you need when you are going to school. You don’t need clothes, you can wear jeans and a t-shirt and I got a lot of my daughter’s clothes at the Salvation Army, hand me down stuff. I don’t know, maybe because at her daycare there were a lot of other university people who don’t tend to be fashion plates, you know. We didn’t have a car; we didn’t need one. We went to

matinees at the movies occasionally and that was the most expensive thing that we did. We would go to the park with a picnic, things like that. It was never a huge hurdle, it really wasn't.

Freda attended law school in Windsor, Ontario, where she worked during the summers to help finance her schooling. The first summer she worked in Toronto, so a friend stored her furniture and she and her daughter moved to Toronto. She said, "I can't even imagine this now—finding housing, finding daycare, carting—oh my God." She said the summer employment was worth it and she was able to save a bit of money for her next year of school.

She did qualify for and accept funding for subsidized daycare: "I couldn't have done it without that; I just didn't have enough money." The piece of mind of reliable daycare was "absolutely key—knowing that your child is okay and you can focus during the day."

Freda was able to arrange for some periods of relief from her parenting role. Freda's ex-husband lived in a different city and she took their daughter to stay with him for about three weeks during first year exams. She described it this way: "I was just cramming, you know, 20 hours a day because I was scared to death that I was going to fail." She said her ex-husband would also take Tara for some time in the summer months but that didn't really help her for school. Freda had no other family support but she was able to make arrangements with other students who had kids: "This one student's wife, they had a little boy so she looked after Tara sometimes while I was cramming for exams. It was sort of a play date."

Having suitable housing was very important to Freda. There was no family housing at University of Windsor at that time. For the first year they lived in a one-bedroom basement apartment beside the city's jail. The next year during the summer, when her daughter was with her father, Freda went up and down the streets near the university looking for better housing until she found a "for rent" sign on a small house owned by the university. She described it as,

perfect and dead cheap. I felt lucky to be there and I think that is important, you know, that I felt that I had found something that really worked for me. That house was great because there was a yard for Tara, and it was sort of normal life as opposed to living in a basement apartment which felt very depressing.

She kept the place for the rest of the time she was at school. It is interesting to note that after she moved out she found out that her perfect house was actually a fire-trap with sub-standard wiring.

Freda described law school as scary:

They do that thing first year—"You look to your left you look to your right and one of you won't be there by Christmas" and everybody was looking at me—I figure because they all knew I had a little kid. I think it was if I felt that if I didn't keep going forward I would fall back into the sort of welfare pit. It felt like this monster nipping at my heels. If I didn't keep motivated, keep focused, keep working I would fall into the void.

Freda graduated in the top ten percent of her class. Freda said she didn't know the standing of the other single mother in her class, but she knows that she also graduated and later owned her own law office.

For Freda one of the most significant barriers was the attitude of people around her. She said:

I was very, very sensitive that as a single parent you don't get the same leeway that parents in two-parent homes get. I always felt that Tara had to be perfectly dressed, perfectly clean, otherwise she'd be seen as neglected, you know, the product of a broken home and all this kind of thing.

Freda also said she was very selective about who she opened up to:

People would either feel sorry for me, or figure that I wasn't going to make it or that I somehow stumbled into the wrong school. Or most people assumed I got accepted on the basis as a mature student. And I didn't; I got accepted on the basis of my marks and my LSAT score. My LSAT score was way off the map. I am not a superhero on the one hand and I am not a welfare case on the other hand. I am just doing what I have to, to get through.

Freda described her time at law school:

It was the best of times and the worst of times in a lot of ways. I had to stay very, very, very, very focused. I didn't have any social life to speak of. I'd stay at school until 4:30 or 5:00 and then go get Tara and come home and make dinner and then study all evening, and that was my life. And then on the weekends, because we didn't have any money, we would go grocery shopping on Saturday. Sunday we always went to the University pool, which was free, have a sauna after and then we would go to McDonald's. That was our "big treat." That was our Sundays and we did that every weekend and every Sunday I made her French toast. She seemed to like the routine, having the same thing happen all the time. I

like diversity, but for her it seemed to work. Anyway I spent all weekend with my daughter and didn't study until she went to bed; it was one of my decisions.

Freda viewed being a single parent as almost a full-time job and said that going to school "certainly law school or graduate school or even undergraduate school" is like a full-time occupation:

Something had to give and what I gave up was my social life. The most important quality, I think, that got me through, was the ability to be organized and disciplined. We had this rule that supper had to be ready in half an hour or less and I had a whole sort of list in my mind of suppers that I could get ready in twenty minutes. You have to have special rules for yourself. Maybe you are not going to do everything that other moms do, you are not going to sew all your kids' clothes—I mean, you have to take shortcuts and not feel guilty about it. One of the biggest pressures was the need to always be organized and never let things get out of hand. I had to keep up with my schoolwork because if I got behind I would never be able to catch up given the other demands on me, whereas other students could goof around sometimes.

Freda thought the situation of having a little more life experience than the younger students and the fact that she was a single mother was also an advantage at times:

I had both feet planted very firmly on the real ground. I was much more centred in the realities of life and the practical side of what our legal institutions do, to people and for people, than the kind of student who has never spent any time away from school. I always claimed it made me a better lawyer and I think that is true. I have had some experiences with lawyers lately and some lawyers think

they know more than their clients. Boy, I have very little tolerance for that kind of thing now because of my own experiences.

She said being a single parent made her more compassionate:

It forces you to deal with the realities of life. There is no one else—you are doing it all; you are learning to balance priorities. Psychologically it made me a more well-rounded person than some other law students. There is a whole myth around that a certain number of people crack-up by Christmas and a certain number crack up by the end of the year. I felt like having Tara was a preventive medicine. I would have to leave the books at the table and spend two hours playing with a little kid every evening. Playing games of imagination, you know, we would play cards, we'd sing songs, roll around on the floor, build blocks and all that kind of stuff and you know I think it's a good antidote to that kind of heavy intellectual work. Ironically I think it helped my sanity. I think other students would relieve the stress by going drinking, whereas I could relieve the stress by playing childish games with my daughter and going swimming and that kind of stuff and I think it was quite healthy for me.

Although Freda recognized the benefit of her situation, she also said she “felt a little bit defensive or that I had to be a little bit on guard until I could suss out how someone was going to react to me.”

Freda described law school as being worth it, both financially and emotionally: It helped me maintain a healthy level of self-esteem and a sense of competence that I could achieve things. It gave me a sense that I was on an upward slope, that I was getting somewhere in life rather than stuck on a plateau or even a downward

slope, and I think that was quite important to me, to feel like I had a future. It gave me the confidence that if I make up my mind that I want to do something I can probably do it. If I decide it is important enough and I am willing to spend the time and the energy and the work—that is kind of enabling.

Freda said that there might have been a subliminal connection between her choice to study law and the guarantee it might provide that she wouldn't be the "welfare mom with the welfare kid." She said she did it mostly for her daughter because she thought she had to have at least some stability in her life. "It takes money to raise a child adequately. I mean you have to have a stable environment and you have to have enough money for a half-decent home."

June: Had to Prove That She was Smart Enough: Her Dream was to Become a Teacher

June's 12-year marriage ended in 1982 when she was 30 years old and her two children were eight and 11 years old. She had married when she was 18 years old and at the time her husband was in his second year of university. June said she always felt stupid because of her early school experiences. She had quit high school during Grade 10 and before that her mother had really done most of her schooling for her. June explained:

she would type up a big pile of pages for me to memorize for that week and so I spit out all that information in my exams. I did really well in school except for math because you can't type out pages to memorize in math.

During the last couple of years of her marriage June attended a vocational school where she completed her secondary school equivalency and then a one-year business program. June said her husband had always encouraged her to think about going to

university once the youngest child was in school but when the time came he changed his mind, said that they couldn't afford it, and encouraged her to continue at vocational school where she could get funding to take a one-year business program. Of that experience, June said, "I could never in my entire life see myself in an office doing office work but I did that course and I hated it and I did feel stupid in that course, although I passed it."

June describes the time when her marriage ended this way:

I had no work skills, work experience out in the world and I still really had a burning desire to be a kindergarten teacher. I thought since I am separated I can get student loans which can allow me to fulfill my dream of being a kindergarten teacher. The other reason I wanted to go to university was because I felt like my mother had done my schooling for me, so I had to prove to myself that I could learn myself and that I was smart enough, smart enough to be a teacher.

June said she had known that she wanted to be a kindergarten teacher since she was 12 years old. She enrolled at Memorial University of Newfoundland where she took a five-year degree program in Education to become a teacher. June said, "I had almost no support from family except from my sister in law, who was a doctor. She was supportive and didn't think I was stupid. She gave me a part-time job as a receptionist at her medical clinic which I kept all through school and that really helped."

June said that her kids were neutral; they were fine with her decision. She described how she felt about other people's opinions of what she should do with her life:

My mother thought I was totally nuts and suggested that I should go out and get a job. Like I had experience and I could just do that—or that I could live on \$4 and

something cents an hour with two children—that was minimum wage in Newfoundland. My brother thought I was nuts and that I should just join his wife at the ice cream factory and make good money in Newfoundland, \$10 per hour. June also said her ex-husband had little hope for her and thought that she would not make it through.

June said she didn't feel stigmatized by being a single parent:

I just thought I was different than a lot of single parents really. For one thing I think it was common back then for women particularly to feel a failure if their marriage didn't work. I was married for 12 years. Maybe I would have felt a failure if it was only 12 months. But I didn't feel a failure over that and the only part of my life that I felt maybe I was a failure was my intelligence because I didn't get to prove myself.

June said that her attitude towards single parenthood was also probably different because of the way she had grown up:

In 1958 when I was six years old in Newfoundland, divorce was basically unheard of. My mother threw my father out and she had a baby of one year old and me who was almost seven and we just went to live with my grandparents; we didn't have a choice. My grandfather just brought his big truck out and piled our stuff into it and brought us to their house. But I grew up believing that you can be a single parent and still get along because my mother went back to work. I had two mothers; my grandmother was the real stay at home mother type anyway and my mother worked as a bookkeeper. So I grew up thinking a woman can be great in

the home and great at work and you don't necessarily have to have a partner to succeed.

June said she was told, "if I was ever asked where my father was I was to say he was away working, which wasn't a lie, he was away working, but I was never to say that my mother and father were separated or divorced, never." June said it was very different with her kids, that she was much more open and flexible about things with them. June also said that her children were luckier because they got to spend time with their father whereas she had not had that opportunity.

June received \$600 per month for child and spousal support, and to finance her schooling she took out student loans. She also received a \$500 grant every term. She maintained a part-time job of between 15 and 20 hours per week. Altogether she had only about \$12,000 per year, that was "enough if you just knew how to struggle right." For the last two-and-a-half years June moved into the city where she qualified for low-cost housing. June also had a relatively new car that she had received as part of her divorce settlement. She says she was frugal and knew "how to stretch a penny like no one else does." June said she felt lucky and that she was much better off than most single parents.

June did not have to arrange for any daycare because of the age of her children. For the first couple of years she was able to either get home close to the time when her children got off school, or her children would go over to their paternal grandparents who lived very nearby. June said,

I was stretched fairly thin because I was a full-time parent/housekeeper, full-time university student and I had a 15-20 hours a week job. Stretched very thin, but I still had a social life and I was very happy for the most part and I bloomed, I just

totally bloomed as an individual. I wasn't just someone's wife or someone's mother.

June said she loved school, "totally loved it." Even though she was older than almost everyone she said,

I was youthful and fit in well with the other students. I was a dry sponge. I detested school growing up, but that was under the authoritarian attitude and imprisonment of my family, so when I was on my own and had to prove myself, I had a different attitude. I hardly ever missed classes so that was great. I loved doing assignments because I loved writing. I hated studying, I never knew how to study 'cause all I did all my life was memorize. I was, and still am, such a slow reader because my mother read everything to me all the time.

June took a "how to study" course which she says really helped. When asked if it was financially and emotionally worth it to have gone back to school June replied,

oh totally, totally because the thing, the thing in my life, I didn't have confidence intellectually. Once I got my degree, I had more confidence. Once I was supporting myself as a substitute teacher, I had more confidence. And once I got full-time work I finished blooming into full strength.

June said the need to prove herself pushed her through. "It rang in my head when my ex-husband in an argument once said something about me being stupid." June says she was also driven by the negative attitudes of others:

I really didn't want to prove them right and I didn't want to prove my Mother right by her saying I was nuts for going to University. Even my divorce lawyer

who was a woman—progressive lawyer—basically said, Are you sure you want to do this? You know this is a very hard long struggle?

Although June was not confident that she was intelligent enough to complete university, she knew she was an extremely hard worker and that it was this that would get her through. Reflecting about what might have happened if she had not gone back to school she said, “if I had struggled on a poor minimum wage job in Newfoundland then I would have been weaker, I would have been poor and poverty makes you weaker anyway. I know that from being poor for a long time.”

Jean: At the Same Time you Gain Knowledge, you Gain Self-esteem

Jean was 28 and her son was 5 years old when she became a single parent and left the Yukon to attend university on Vancouver Island. She described herself as a “high school dropout,” but also said that she had scored at the university level when she wrote a series of placement tests. Jean described her motivation to go away to school:

I just thought that I deserved to be smarter. I just thought I was settling for less and I knew I could have more. I remember being younger and all the university students would come up to the Yukon in the summer, and I would go out and meet all these young people. I remember they would be talking about sociology and anthropology and psychology, and I used to tell myself I would like to learn about all these subjects but I couldn’t really contribute to the conversation. It used to bother me and I thought I am going to go and I am going to gain some knowledge, and that is exactly what I did. So I left here.

When Jean’s mother, an Aboriginal woman, married her father, a White man, she lost her Indian status. Then in 1986 the Government of Canada passed Bill C31 which

enabled families who had been stripped of their status to apply for it to be reinstated.

With this reinstated status, Jean and her six older siblings gained, for the first time, access to funding for post-secondary education. Jean said “it was a big factor; all of us now have post-secondary education.” Jean reflected on her own and her siblings’ success at returning to school:

Thank God we were not dependent on that whole DIA [Department of Indian Affairs] system of learned helplessness. In my mind I am so grateful that my mom married my dad. We were not viewed as First Nation people in the eyes of the Government of Canada. I think that the blessing of all of that is DIA had zero control over our lives, whereas with status people they just moved right in and it’s like, “We are your new mom and dad; we are going to tell you what to do, how to live your life. You can’t have a will, you have to have a status card. This is how you’re going to have your dental, your optical, your meds, everything.” They just took over people’s lives and made them helpless, and when my mom married my dad who is a White man, we never were raised like that. So when C31 came along it was like, “Hey, we can go pursue education through this bill so let’s do it.” So that’s what we did.

Jean had never lived anywhere other than Yukon but she said,

I just put my son in my car and packed up as much as I could and I just left. It was probably one of the best things I did in my life because I separated myself from my family and got to deal with some personal issues from my childhood. I got to be successful at school and met some really nice people in the process of doing all of that.

She enrolled in a tourism management course for first semester and her marks put her on the honour roll. After that first semester she knew it wasn't what she wanted to do:

The thing with the tourism industry is you either have to own your own business or basically you are doing grunt labour for very low wages. So I just pulled myself out of that and started taking liberal arts courses. I was quite happy with that.

Jean attended college for two years on Vancouver Island. She described it as one of the most difficult times in her life. Not only was she going back to school far away from home, she also said she decided it would be a good opportunity to do some personal work through counselling. She described the process as “opening up a can of worms.” Looking back, she said:

I don't know how I did it—I managed to make honour roll in all my terms, I won an anthropology award, and I was also going through probably one of the hardest periods in my life—all at the same time—and raising my little boy. For me, school was my outlet. Like some people might think school was tough, and it was tough, but for me what was really tough was dealing with all the personal issues. What was easy was going to school and escaping it all.

While she attended college she made use of the campus daycare for her son and said that daycare right on the campus “really made a difference.”

Jean said she was not sure what more she wanted to do with her studies so she returned to the Yukon and worked for two years. After that she went back down to Vancouver Island and took a ten-month full-time counsellor training course at the Native Friendship Centre. She describes it as:

Great! I took the course because the whole premise of the course is not really to teach you to be a counsellor but also to deal with a lot of your own issues. I thought if I can take a better look at my own issues then I can probably decide what it is that I wanted to do and be in a better position to help others.

Right after the counsellor training she returned to the Yukon and started the four-year Native Teacher Education Program at Yukon College. Jean described that program as:

pretty challenging because at the time you had to have First Nation ancestry to enter into the program, and the politics would flood down onto the students. Sometimes it was really subtle and sometimes it was really overt. I think people thought that we were in some kind of watered-down program for First Nations people; they had to dumb it down a little bit in order for us to be capable enough to work in the education system. It was not the case.

During this four-year degree program, Jean's son was in school and her daughter was born. She had her daughter in April of 1999 and graduated in June of 2000.

She said,

I literally brought my baby to class with me and breastfed her. I remember bringing a fan and my baby. Don't anyone touch the fan because it was really hot and it was May. So I had a fan literally blowing on me and I was breastfeeding my baby taking my last set of classes. I would write papers while she was laying on a pillow breastfeeding while I was typing over her on the keyboard.

Jean graduated from Yukon Native Teacher Education Program with *great distinction*, the highest honours you can get on a degree. She said if she had not gone to school she

might still be doing some boring administrative job for the government; “I would have had an income but also would have had zero satisfaction in terms of career.”

Jean said that it was important to do really well in school because she is a bit of a perfectionist.

I came out of an alcoholic home and all the other stuff that is associated with it and I think that sometimes when you are a helpless child and you don’t have control over your life, when you become an adult you realize—I can have control over certain things in my life and I can do pretty good on what I have control over.

Jean said doing well in school has always been a driving force in her life: “It has gotten me through some really desperate times in my life, knowing that I could control it.” Jean said it can also work against her, and as she grows older, she is realizing that she does not have to be such a perfectionist and “drive myself crazy making sure that everything is done right.”

Jean said she thought her son felt fine about her going to school:

When I went to school I always sort of scheduled my life out so that I spent time with my son so he didn’t feel neglected or at least I hope he didn’t. I used to try to work after my son was in bed at night.

Jean also said that consistency is a good thing: “If you know you are going to be at school for four years then try to make it as consistent and routine for your kids as possible.” Jean said that friends and family were the most supportive while her children’s fathers were less supportive. She says she was “on all the time” and for the most part, managed all on her own.

Jean said that she thinks society places a stigma on single mothers. "I think that people are quick to criticize the single mother. Society automatically thinks poverty— heavy weight on the system because they are probably collecting some kind of welfare or draining their First Nation." Jean said that because she is a single parent and is visibly Aboriginal, people still undermine her ability:

People still sort of look at you in a different light so I think that you can be a single mom and whatever, but race is a big factor. People are really surprised— people will ask, "What do you do for a living?" and I say, "Well, I am a teacher," and "Where do you teach?" and I say Yukon College. I don't know what it is... They look at me and think, "Oh well, she is Native, she is a single mom; she must be bagging groceries at Superstore," or something like that. When I tell them what it is that I do, they are floored.

Jean said that sometimes it really bothers her.

So what if I am Indian? So what if I am a single parent? Who cares? I am a person; just look at me as a human being. Detach the race, detach my single parenthood, detach all of that and look at me for who I am. We live in a society where people do not do that. They are all so caught up in the material value or if you are married or not.

Jean said she managed financially because she received some funding through her First Nation and supplemented it by working. She said, "I worked in the summers and when I was pregnant with my daughter because I had some advanced standing and had some spares, so I worked." Jean said that she thinks that some people do not know what is available to them, especially when people come in from the small rural communities to

Whitehorse. “They have no idea that there is a daycare subsidy that there is transportation. You know the bus system is not great but it is here and it is available.”

Reflecting back on her accomplishments Jean said, “I did that, so I can do pretty much do anything.” She went on to say,

if you are focused and know that it is okay to shift gears, what you do is never a waste of time. You start out in your little successes. It’s almost a choo-choo train—I can do it—I can do it, and then every time you get some success under your belt you know that you can just do it.

Jean said it is important to:

stay in long enough to experience the success of it, going to school teaches you so many things like how to budget your life, your money, your finances, and how to manage your time. Plus, at the same time you gain knowledge you also gain more self-esteem.

Linda: “Worked the System” to Move Away from Welfare and Low Paying Jobs

Linda became a single parent when her children were five and eight years old. She did not want to be a single parent, but she said that was not nearly as stifling a label as the teen parent label: “Really, for me where it all started was becoming a teenage parent and dropping out of high school—not even finishing high school,” Linda said that she was always the youngest parent amongst her peers resulting in her lacking self confidence; she said, “I was afraid to go to the library and pick up a book on parenting in case I was seen to be a bad mother and they might take my kids away.”

Linda was in grade 11 but she was already taking her grade 12 Math and English when she became pregnant and dropped out of high school. As a result she said she found

it easy to get her GED (General Equivalency Diploma) a little later on. So by the time she and her husband separated she had her GED but no work experience.

Linda went on welfare for a time, but she said, “I knew I had to get an education, well, I knew I needed to get a job.” When she saw an advertisement for a pre-trades training course for women, she applied for that.

It was only eight weeks and I must have been funded to take it. It was great—I really enjoyed it. I got to try welding, a bit of mechanics and carpentry. It was all women so that was really neat. It was a very positive experience.

One of the instructors from that course hired her to work in the “Test and Tune Program” for the summer and she travelled around the Yukon testing car emissions.

After her positive exposure to the trades, Linda looked at possible career options and thought she would like to try to get into the heavy equipment mechanics program, a 10-month pre-apprenticeship course that offered the equivalent of the first year of an apprenticeship program. “I was the first woman ever to take the course and that was interesting,” she said. “You have to be interviewed before you can get into these programs, and they were really nervous about letting a woman into the program.”

Linda was accepted. She said, “It was an interesting experience being in a class with all guys and a red neck guy instructor.” She finished the 10-month course in 1981 just when “the economy crashed.” The shop where she did her on-the-job training had 16 people working when she started, but by the time she finished her schooling it was down to four. She said, “I didn’t have a hope in hell of getting hired on anywhere, so I went and got a job at a laundromat.”

Linda worked at the laundromat for about a year before she decided that she somehow needed to make herself more employable. She said that because numbers had always come easily to her, she applied for, and entered a 10-month accounting course at Yukon College. She remembers getting some combination of employment insurance (UIC at that time) or social assistance to take that course. “It always felt like you were playing the game—you had to say the right words and convince someone that this was the best thing and this was what you always planned to do with your life.”

Linda did not complete the accounting course. As she remembers it, “an opportunity came up to get hired by an accounting firm and I was really short of money—and the course was kind of Mickey Mouse—so I thought, I’ll get a job and learn on the job.” Linda said she learned pretty fast that the last thing she wanted to be was an accountant; “It was pretty dry.” Although she continued at that job for a year, “it wasn’t a good fit.”

Linda said that, once again, she found herself looking to the college to see if there was course work that made sense for her. She entered the business administration program and was able to collect Employment Insurance while she attended. She completed the first year diploma and started the second year. “But I didn’t have much money,” she said, “so I left and took a job as a supervisor at McDonald’s.” She stayed at that job for six months.

Then, in 1986, Linda started working with the government, “my first good paying job,” she said. She has worked in government for the past 20 years. “I felt like I had enough education to get in the door and then I did a pretty good job of climbing up the

ladder,” she said. “Now, I have this job with this fancy title—whether it means anything or not—I actually like having that.” Reflecting on her college experiences she says:

I have always been really good at convincing people what I was saying was sincere and what I really mean, which, in a way, is kind of unfortunate. For example, if I came up and told you that I felt I had gotten all I needed out of the program and that I really need the money and I am leaving you probably wouldn't think to question me. It is so hard to get in to those programs and so easy to get out. It was always a struggle to get in. You were always trying to convince someone that you were good enough or that this was the right thing for you or whatever. I heard via the grapevine one time that one of the social workers felt bad because she had given me such a hard time.

Linda said getting the funding to take courses was the real problem. “If someone told me that they would fund me through a full university degree, that would have made a real difference,” she said.

There were all those aptitude tests that I scored really high on, but how was I going to get there? There is pressure to get you working. The social worker saw me as someone who could get a job. Maybe a longer view would have been better, to be allowed to become more of what I wanted to be.

Reflecting on her educational experiences Linda said,

I never actually liked school. I never really felt like I fit in. Even in high school I never really felt like I fit in. I probably felt like a failure each time I came out of one of those courses. I really felt like a failure when I came out of the mechanics course. You know to me that was one of those times in your life where you say

that is kind of the end of a dream. I was not really passionate about being a mechanic, but that it was hard to have finished the program only to find that there were no jobs. It didn't do what I had hoped it would do for me.

Linda said, despite all that she had been through, "it was absolutely worthwhile returning to school." She said she preached to her kids, "You don't want to be like me; get out there and get an education and then you can have the money, you can do whatever you want."

With regard to her children, Linda said, "in a lot of ways school was good because I actually got home a little earlier than if I was working full time." She said she didn't use daycare because her children were in school and "they could get along without it." Looking back on how she managed financially, Linda said the thing that saved her from being totally poor was that her parents bought a house for her and they charged her minimal rent. She said she was also lucky that when her aunt died she left her a car; "I could do my own oil changes."

Linda said that although money motivated her to go to school, education itself was also a motivator; "when I was in high school I had this belief that I could do whatever I set my mind to and I had expected to go to university. So to not have an education was quite a stigma for me. I did not want to be seen as an uneducated person," she said.

Linda said she likes the way things have changed in society; "that there are schools for young, single mothers is fantastic and the way child support is handled is an improvement." When asked what advice she would give to young single mothers about going to school she said, "Go for it!" Her advice to social service agencies is to help their

clients go to school. “What is the worst that happens? They drop out. But they learn something along the way, and it is important to let people try,” she said.

She said she is proud to have worked her way up through the system. “I have seen how people are treated at the very bottom and how it feels to be treated that way and, yes, I have gotten out of that and hopefully I do not have to go back.”

Jennifer: Needed to Direct her Own Life

Jennifer got married when she was 24 years old, and her son, John, was born a year and a half later. “At the time I thought marriage would give direction to my life but it turned out to be absolutely the wrong decision and John was only about six months old when we separated.” She said there was a lot of pressure to stay married but a real turning point for her was when she realized “I could leave the relationship and I could direct my own life.”

Almost immediately after her separation she began the process of going back to school and the decision was partly an economic one. She had witnessed older sisters who were raising children on their own and saw what that was doing to their lives. “They were struggling.” She remembers thinking: “this can’t be my life—it won’t be my life.” “Going back to school was a decision not to be somebody you saw out there,” she said.

Jennifer reflects back on her upbringing and her decision to go to university and on to law school:

You know as a child I come from a background of poverty and deprivation and when that happens to you, you grow up with a sense that you need to get to the other side, because the other side looks better.

Jennifer remembers wanting to become a lawyer when she was 12 years old: “It is a prestigious profession, it is a powerful profession, and it is an intelligent profession, All of these things society attributes to this particular profession, and for me it was a desired thing to be.”

Jennifer applied as a mature student and was accepted by both the University of British Columbia and the University of Victoria. She said she did not know if the mature student option still existed but she was, “so glad that it was there because I didn’t graduate from grade 12.” Jennifer and her toddler son packed up and moved to Victoria in September 1983. Jennifer described the first semester at university as one of the hardest times in her life:

It was a major culture shock to find myself there as a single parent in this huge, what felt like a completely foreign university environment. I felt so much older. I felt displaced. It was not a good time. I was not used to living in the city—things are so dramatically different; it was really a struggle. My son was about a year and a half—just a little guy. I had people to stay with when I first got there but I needed to find daycare and a place to live all within the first two weeks of being there, as well as being in school. It was overwhelming; I can’t describe it any other way. It was just overwhelming.

Looking back, Jennifer said:

There was a stigma attached to being a single parent and there wasn’t a lot of help around for single parents. I mean there was daycare, but this was available to anybody, not just a single parent. It felt like it was harder and obviously it was

practically harder. Not only did I have to keep up with studies and exams and paper writing but I also had to look after all of John's needs.

Jennifer said she contemplated quitting many times in that first four months but that there was part of her that firmly said, "I will not fail and I am not going home to say I couldn't do this." So she "stuck it out." They found a place to live within walking distance to the University, which she described as "not a bad place." Her son's daycare was at the University and she described it as "quality daycare." Jennifer said, "everything just seemed to fall together. It was hard—it was very frightening—but things came together in a way that was positive."

Jennifer did not have a lot of contact with family when she was in Victoria:

Whenever somebody in a group like that makes a decision to make a change it creates fear and they want you to stay home. There wasn't a lot of negative messaging but there wasn't really a lot of vocal support.

Jennifer explained what she describes as a complicated element for Aboriginal people: "Only recently is there a real drive for an education. Back then if you pursued something different it was threatening to a lot of people and it was discouraged." Jennifer said she was fortunate to have a few role models who were very encouraging, including one in the legal profession who was always saying, "Go back to school, you should be in school."

Jennifer said she could remember coming back to the Yukon at Christmas in the middle of that first year and looking around, thinking, "Why did I miss this so much?" She said, "it was sort of a freeing" and she knew she was doing the right thing. After that first trip home, she "let go and went into the whole university life for the next six and a half years." One thing Jennifer said she felt bad about was how hard the move was on her

son John's relationship with his dad: "I was so focused on moving my life forward that that was not honestly on the top of my considerations—I think at the end of everything it worked out for the best, but I'm not sure."

Reflecting on how she managed her whole university experience Jennifer said, "many First Nation people of my generation were raised in environments that were challenging, sometimes extremely challenging, and you definitely come out of those environments with strengths." She said she thought, "if you view them as strengths they help you get through the tough times."

Jennifer said she had to organize her life very carefully and that time management was key. She said:

With a 9-5 job you can go home and leave it behind but that is not the case at University. While John was in daycare I would go to classes, do research in the library and also fit in the personal things that I needed to do like go pay bills, get groceries and so on. Then I would pick him up at daycare, come home make sure he had dinner and got ready for bed. Once he was in bed, it was back to the schoolwork.

Jennifer remembered her son being a very early riser:

He would get up and go get his cereal and get his milk then come out to the living room and sit down and turn on the TV—terrible admission. Then I would get up. I remember one morning he did this and I was sitting at the living room at the coffee table with the typewriter in front of me. I had been there all night. I remember him sort of looking at me with this "What are you doing here? This is

my time.” It was a realization for me that this was the pattern, that he worked it out, too—he was cooperative.

Jennifer said there were many times when she thought “I can’t do this—it is just too much—to be a single parent and to be in school.” However, she also knew if she were not doing this she would simply be working and it would be a “hand to mouth scenario.” She remembers thinking, “I could be working as a secretary, and I don’t mean to be demeaning in any way to that group of people, but the university environment was exciting. It was fun being exposed to things that were fascinating.”

Academically, Jennifer said she always had this sense of “you can do better—you can do more.” However, looking back on her transcripts from her undergraduate studies and from law school, she found that they were average and in some areas well above average. She said to herself, “‘My god, cut yourself some slack. You did very well under the circumstances, a single parent with the time you had.’ Actually some days I feel very proud.”

Jennifer said she enjoyed her social life at university and mentioned that she met people at university who are still close friends. Socially she gravitated towards older students and mentioned that there were quite a few at the University of Victoria. She said “that was a source of not feeling so alone there.” Along with other First Nation people from all over Canada she participated in the Native Students’ Union at the university, and that, “it felt good to belong to a group like that.” During her undergraduate degree she was the only single parent in her social group but in law school she developed friendships with other single parents. Jennifer said they compared stories and realized that,

you and your child become a unit in a way that you may not if there are two parents. And the unit is about functioning, and Mom's got to go to school and has exams, and everything just has to function around that.

Jennifer said that, at that time, First Nations people who were going back to university were taking either education or law, and she described this phenomenon as, The First Nation obligation –an expectation that if you are First Nations and if you have aspirations to go to school you are obliged to contribute politically or socially. I look back on it now and I rebel a little against it. I worry about actually saying this but I think there is a culture—and I am saying this purely from First Nation's perspective. I look at my own community and I see kids that never leave that community because of the message that is given to them at a cultural level and I do not think we do this purposefully. The message is there that you have to be driven by something political. Instead of saying to these kids, "be creative; be whatever you can be," we are giving them a message that they are responsible for the burden.

When asked what advice she would have for social service and student financial assistance organizations Jennifer said,

I think the whole system right now is geared towards students coming right out of high school. I think maybe a resource centre and someone within the Department of Education that is geared specifically towards helping single parents with information and the planning.

Jennifer states, “it was absolutely worth it to return to school. It changed my life and I have opportunities that I would never have had if I didn’t have that.” Looking back, Jennifer said,

I am not sure I would go into law but at the time it just seemed the whole push was in that direction. Now I have a different perspective—I want to do what I enjoy and what I want to do.

Joyce: Money Motivated Her and She Craved the Challenges of Education

Joyce grew up in England where she left school at the age of 16:

It was just the thing to do and my parents really didn’t believe in post-secondary education. I know there were a couple of teachers, even phoning my mom and saying that “Joyce should go on to do her A levels” and things like that but it just wasn’t going to happen at all.

She got married and had her son John when she was 17 years old. Joyce took her son with her to a job she loved in a clothing store but soon changed to secretarial work because she needed more money than the store could offer:

It wasn’t that I wanted to be earning more than my husband, but I wanted be doing my own fair share. With our situation being so unstable, it was a good thing that I was pulling in my own because there were three or four separations creating these long periods when I would be on my own and he wasn’t paying any support at all.

She said life was difficult and, at one point, the only place she could afford was a room where she had to share a bathroom with several other people. Later she moved into council (social) housing and it was then that her husband decided to move back in with

her. Joyce said, “in England there are generations of people who have only lived on council estates; that’s the way it is.”

Joyce was very close, in age and emotionally, to her younger sister who left school at an even younger age than did Joyce. Her sister had three children, all by different men, and Joyce suspected that she was into the drug scene for a while. Joyce said: “My sister became for me the symbol of what I didn’t want to become. She has always lived in council housing.”

When Joyce was 22 she said she decided she wanted to leave England and started researching various immigration policies. Her husband was a mechanic and there was a need for mechanics in Canada so they packed up and left: “I just didn’t want to go back, ever, to that council sort of situation and not having any money.”

Joyce and her husband separated on a permanent basis about four years after moving to Canada and Joyce went back to work doing temporary secretarial placements. It did not pay very well and Joyce remembered thinking, “how can I make as much money as possible?” After doing some research she said she decided to go to school to become a legal secretary: “For one full school year I went to school in the evenings and worked temporary jobs during the day.” After completing the legal secretary course she started working full-time at a law firm.

Joyce continued to go to school in the evenings because she said she “liked the challenge of learning.” She took business administration at Ryerson: “I figured if I could get this two year diploma I was sort of proving to myself that I could do it. I knew I wanted to go to university and get an undergraduate degree some day.” She said it took quite a few years of going to school in the evenings to get that diploma.

Joyce did not receive any type of support for this part-time schooling: “I just did it on my own.” She said it was busy and some of the commutes were quite difficult but she said her son had just grown up with it, so for him, it was normal: “I was always doing some course or something. We would just do our homework together and he didn’t think anything of it.”

Joyce said her desire to go to law school developed while she was working for law firms. She said:

As a legal secretary you are pretty much doing a lawyer’s job, especially in certain areas like wills and estates. I would see the mistakes I was making because the lawyer would correct it and give it back to me. So I got better and better over time and thought, “I could do this.”

Joyce also worked in the section of a very large law firm that was responsible for hiring all the articling students: “I had to get all the resumes ready, sort transcripts, and even make the initial recommendations of who was going to be interviewed and who wasn’t.” She said she knew the criteria that they were using and it became this ultimate challenge for her: “I wondered if I could actually do this and actually go back to school. It is all very well to say that I can draft a will, but I wonder if I could actually become a lawyer.”

Joyce said her boss at the time encouraged her, and she remembers talking to him about it. Joyce describes her attitude toward applying to law school:

There is sort of this naïve part of me that said, “You can be a lawyer if you want.”

Then there was this other part of me that said, “What the hell are you doing? You

can't do that. That's way beyond you. Don't do it. Don't even try it." It is obvious which side always won out.

Joyce describes the process of applying to law school as "really stressful." At that time her son was with her on a full-time basis: "Access was minimal and even then his father wouldn't show up when he was supposed to." Joyce said she told her mother, who still lived in England, that she had applied to law school and received a typical unsupportive type of response: "Well I guess that is ok, if you pass, but I don't know why you give up a good job to do it."

Joyce said that, because she did not have an undergraduate degree, she applied within the mature student category, which was an option for students who didn't otherwise meet the entrance requirements. She said she was lucky because she got into Osgoode Hall in Toronto and did not have to move:

I had just bought a small duplex with a friend of mine. I lived downstairs and she rented out the upstairs. It was pretty small but it was fine. I did not want to move. It just meant a really long commute for the three years of law school.

Joyce said there was "always this insecurity with money." She did as much overtime as she could in order to save money during the 18 months prior to attending law school, and after that, she "made it work with some child support that came in every month and student loans."

Joyce said there was not a lot of support for mature students and that waiting until her son was 14 had made it easier: "There were other students who had really young kids, one women dropped out. Basically, once you were in law school you were just

floundering along with everybody else.” Joyce remembers that even with all her previous part-time school,

I still didn’t know how to study for being a full-time student. Suddenly I was juggling five or six courses and the amount of reading was horrendous. It was just overwhelming. That first semester I was absolutely convinced I was going to fail.

Joyce said that after the first term it was much better: “I saw my marks and realized, I know I can do better but at least I know I can do this.” She said after that first semester she relaxed and became a regular student, “leaving things ‘til the last six or eight weeks and then being in a major panic to get it done.”

Joyce said she doesn’t feel there is a large stigma attached to being a single parent but she did want the best for her son:

The guidance counsellor at my son’s school said to me, “Well, he should be learning a trade. He should be doing something with his hands.” If you had seen my son when he was three with Meccano and Lego you would never ever say that. He was the worst. I looked at this guy and said, “You know you are only saying that because he is Black.” It takes a lot to get me upset, but I was furious and I just said “You know that is the most racist thing, and if I ever hear you say that again about my son I will have you out of here, and I mean it.” I was pretty young but I was so mad. I remember saying, “No he is not going to do that. He is going to do the academics course. I don’t care how long it takes him. He is going to do it because I know he can do it and you guys need to help him.”

After high school, Joyce said her son wrote his SAT and LSAT and had scores in the top three percentile.

Looking back on this incident, Joyce said, “I didn’t really make the connection with what happened to me and how angry I was that my mom had forced me into the commerce stream instead of the academic stream.” Joyce said that because she had her son so young there was always something to prove:

Okay, I had him young but that doesn’t mean that I am going to be one of these parents who lives off welfare for the rest of my life. I see it in my work now, there is always this presumption that because you are so young, you can’t take care of your child and you are going to be really irresponsible. I always had to doubly prove; I mean I was really young and Black. So I had that stigma as well.

At 22, when she first came to Canada, she said “there was no way I would have thought I could be a lawyer. It wasn’t in the picture at all. It would have been incomprehensible.” She said being away from England probably helped and taking it in steps was important: “Getting those first few “As” made me realize that I am brighter than I thought I was. Gaining confidence slowly over the years really helped.”

Joyce’s advice for other single parents going back to school is:

Believe in yourself totally—never give up. Just have something that drives you, no matter what is. If it has to be as blatant as money, just say to yourself, “I want the best for my son or my daughter; I am better than this.” Whatever it takes to get you up every morning even after going to bed at two or three in the morning, just do it, and when you think, “I can’t do this anymore” just turn that switch off, do not listen to that voice, and just keep on going.

For social service and student financial assistance organizations, she says: “Don’t only look at people who are really poor. I think it is fair to say that most single parents

are really struggling. Give them an extra financial break, because that is a huge barrier for single parents.” Joyce said, “it was scary, it was unbelievably scary to have \$20,000 to \$25,000 worth of debt when I finished law school.”

Joyce had sworn she would never go to school again after she finished her law degree: “It was like a nightmare. I hated being with all these kids that came from wealthy families. Everything was handed to them. I just didn’t want to be around them again.” Now Joyce says that she is starting to feel like maybe there is a Master’s degree down the line because there are areas of law that might be interesting or unexplored: “Just another challenge to prove something to myself maybe. At this point it would be the challenges, ‘Am I bright enough?’ or ‘Can I be disciplined enough to write a thesis?’” Joyce sums up her post-secondary experiences as: “Totally worth it to go to school. Life would have been much harder if I hadn’t gone to school.”

CHAPTER 4: THE RESEARCH FINDINGS

Inspired by Wolcott (2001), I have adopted an integrated approach for dealing with my literature review and research findings. This means that what might conventionally be found in a separate chapter called the literature review appears in this chapter of research findings as well as throughout the thesis document. This approach follows the logical pattern of how my thinking has been influenced by repeated reviews of the literature during my exploration of the research data. The literature that originally influenced my thinking, approaches to critical pedagogy and family therapy, is introduced here alongside the interpretation and analysis of my data. Where appropriate, I also include discussions from other research concerning single mothers and post-secondary education. I hope, as Wolcott (2001) suggests, that this approach makes for a more interesting read.

I consider poor single mothers as an oppressed group in the context of Canadian society because of the poverty, low education levels and the negative stereotypes associated with this group. I argue that each of the women in this study resisted being “one of those” single mothers. The labels they heard applied to themselves and to others in their situation helped them make the decision to pursue post-secondary education and motivated them to persist and succeed. Engaging in post-secondary education was part of their resistance against the stereotypes that they felt and the poverty they were not prepared to endure.

I explore the possibility that, by going back to school, each of these women was engaged in a fight for freedom, in their own very personal resistance movement. I draw from the critical approaches to education and pedagogy found within the works of Freire

(1970, 1973) and hooks (1994b). While I want to establish a link between their work and this research, I do not want this linkage to be construed as a diminishment of the severity of the situations that exist for both Black people, who are the subjects of bell hooks' work, and the very poor people of Brazil who are the subjects of Freire's work.

Freire and hooks illuminate the importance of education in the struggle against oppression. However, when these authors discuss resistance they do so in the format of the organized collective. All of the participants in my research felt very much alone in their struggle and I want to highlight the solitary nature of their journeys and the individual strength they bring to their struggle. For this discussion I turn to Wade (2003) who suggests that personal resistance is powerful and should be recognized, honoured and respected.

This chapter is loosely organized into three chronological parts. First, the decision a low-income single mother makes to pursue post-secondary education is explored against Freire's (1973) idea of the need for a critical consciousness. Next, Wade's (1997) idea of honouring personal resistance is introduced and then redefined within the context of single mothers and education to explore how it might have contributed to their academic success. Finally, the post-secondary experiences of these women are used to explore whether or not low-income single mothers' experience education as the practice of freedom (hooks, 1994a).

The decision to pursue post-secondary education: Freire's critical consciousness

Not all low-income single mothers make the decision to go back to school, or even think about it. To answer the question of why the participants of this study were able to make that decision I turn to the work of Paulo Freire. Throughout his work, Freire

emphasizes the need for oppressed people to develop a critical consciousness before they can begin to make positive changes in their lives. He argues that, “if the people were to become critical, enter reality, increase their capacity to make choices (and therefore their capacity to reject the prescriptions of others), threat to privilege would increase as well” (Freire, 1973, p. 20). The women who participated in this research did not follow traditional paths to education; they had to make deliberate and conscious choices to go back to school. Like the oppressed people that were the subjects of Freire’s work, the single mothers in this study reveal how they became critical and how they entered a reality that let them see the unjust circumstances of their lives and/or the lives of other single mothers. Like Freire, I argue that before an oppressed person, in this case a low-income single mother, can make a change she has to be able to question, rather than just accept, her current circumstances. Making the choice to engage in post-secondary education demonstrates what Freire (1973) refers to as an increased capacity to make choices and a rejection of the prescription of others.

Evidence of critical consciousness was revealed by participants when they talked about their decision to go back to school; their stories revealed that they knew how unfair life was for single mothers and it made them feel that they deserved more. Some participants clearly articulated the time when this type of transformation occurred. Jennifer said her decision to return to school coincided with her awareness that she could direct her own life:

I remember making the decision or realizing that I could leave the relationship and I could direct my life and that was sort of a turning point in my life... almost right away I started the process of going back to school.

For Freda her critical consciousness was raised and a new reality was formed through her feminist activities. Her interest in issues of social justice grew and when she thought about going back to school so that she could find a way to support herself and her daughter, she thought about law school: “I thought I bet I can do that—I bet you anything I could do that—and then I wrote the LSAT exam.”

For some, the consciousness and the desire to make different choices for themselves seemed to develop and build over time, whereas for others it appeared to be a more immediate reaction to becoming single mothers. I expected, and some participants revealed, that their critical consciousness was related to poverty. Joyce and Jennifer both experienced poverty in their families of origin and from a young age knew they did not want to be poor when they grew up. But the critical consciousness that most contributed to their decision to go back to school was the awareness they gained by witnessing their sisters struggle with low-income single mother lives. Joyce said that her sister was “perfectly happy with her life” but, for Joyce, it became her nightmare: “she became for me what I didn’t want to become. It was just, I don’t want to become like her. I don’t want that.” So, armed with that critical consciousness, when Joyce became a single parent, she immediately started taking part-time courses in the evenings. Jennifer describes a similar experience:

I have older sisters who had children and I witnessed them being the sole person responsible for raising the children and what that was doing to their lives. They were struggling. I remember, when I then found myself in that situation, realizing that that was going to be my life. I was not going to be able to give my child a lot and I was not going to be able to give much to myself and it was just going to be

about paying bills. So it was sort of a decision not to be somebody you saw out there. I just thought this can't be my life—it won't be my life.

For Joyce and Jennifer, the possibility of being “one of those” single mothers was very close to home because they saw it in their sisters. Instead, by choosing to go back to school, they saw themselves as creating a life that was very different from that of their sisters.

For three of the participants, June, Jean and Linda, the oppression they felt and the critical consciousness they developed was related to the awareness that they were intelligent women who had been denied the opportunity for the education they deserved. For these participants their awareness of the ignorant or “stupid” label that is so often associated with people who become mothers at a very young age was revealed.

June became a mother when she was very young and had never had the opportunity to go to university. She felt that she had been labelled as stupid but said towards the end of her marriage, “I started thinking more for myself,” which she felt contributed to her separation from her husband. She said she wanted to go to university because, “there was something inside of me that in one way knew that I could achieve more. I had higher expectations.” When Jean talked about her decision to go to school she said, “I just thought that I deserved to be smarter than what I was at the time. I just thought I was settling for less and I knew I could have more.”

For most participants the critical consciousness messages in the data revealed not only their awareness of the oppressive nature of their situation, or the oppressive nature of the situations of other single mothers, but also some sort of enabling element. From their stories it is clear that their critical consciousness helped them take control of their

lives by returning to school. The only exception is Linda. Her story does not reveal that enabling message. As a youth she had expected to go to university but when she became a parent during high school her education was interrupted. She said, “to not have an education was quite a stigma for me. I did not want to be seen as an uneducated person.” Linda did not experience as much success with her educational endeavours; she alternated working and participating in what she described as mostly unsatisfying educational programs of short duration. Linda was the only participant who was on welfare when she first became a single mother and she said that she had to “work the system” in order to be able to go back to school. Linda was aware of her intelligence but felt dependant on the system. For her the education she desired continued to be unreachable:

All those aptitude tests but how am I going to get there? There is pressure to get you working, not for education. The social worker saw me as someone who could get a job. Maybe a longer view would be better. To become more of what I wanted to be.

I would argue that Linda was critically conscience of her intelligence and that life was not fair but she did not get to fully “enter reality” or develop as much of “a capacity to make choices” (Freire, 1973, p. 20). Linda’s circumstances were such that she was dependent on, and trapped within, the welfare system. She worked very hard to “reject the prescriptions of others” (p. 20) and she said that she did manage, on several occasions, to “convince them to let her go to school” but her real desire was to go to university and they would only let her take short term schooling that would lead directly to employment.

Some single mothers, possibly like Joyce and Linda's sisters, do not seem to develop a critical consciousness or acknowledge any of the oppressive elements of their lives. Holyfield (2002) who studied the post-secondary experiences of low-income single mothers explains succinctly:

The routine of caring for and providing for our children the best we know how leads most of us to believe that what we see around us is both natural and normal. Most if not all of us tend to accept inequality in the abstract and try to adjust to it as best we can. (p. 51)

She also reveals that when people asked her how she managed to move out of poverty it evoked "survivor's guilt" and she wondered why she had made it out and others had not;

I had a very strong gut feeling that I was normal. I do not mean for this to sound, as a social worker colleague would say, like "negative self talk." But I was like so many of the women I have met who are single parents for a myriad of reasons and are poor but did not choose to be. (p. 50)

Why some are able to go back to school, and some are not is a very complicated question. The ability to go back to school cannot and should not, as Hull (2001) suggested in his study of Aboriginal single mothers in Canada, be simplified as a "willingness to upgrade their education by attending school as mature adults." Holyfield (2002) emphasizes that it is not a question of values; most, if not all, low-income single mothers want more for their children and for themselves. In her discussion of education and mobility she talks about her fear that people think it is just a case of wanting or not wanting to better oneself. This parallels telling oppressed people to just "pull yourself up by the bootstraps" or you "just have to want it more." Oversimplification of the factors of

success gives society a convenient excuse to judge and assign fault to those who are not able to move out and past the poverty and stereotypes that oppress their lives.

For some of the women in my study, separation from their spouses provided both a challenge and an opportunity; they had always wanted to go back to school and when they separated this became a logical and fairly immediate step to take. For others the idea of going back to school developed over a much longer period of time and it was not until certain opportunities presented themselves that they could they make the choice. It is interesting and encouraging that most of the participants, having made the decision once, then repeated the process and went on to succeed through a series of educational programs.

Honouring the Resistance

My desire to focus on and honour the resistance displayed by single mothers was sparked in 2003 when I heard Allan Wade (2003) deliver a powerful opening address to participants of a sexual abuse conference in Whitehorse, Yukon. His address highlighted the need to quit treating people who have experienced sexual or physical abuse as victims (i.e., the lowest of the low in our society; people who cannot even help themselves) and start honouring and celebrating their strength (i.e., all the things they did to minimize the impact of the abuse on their lives). One powerful example Wade provided was how he counselled a man who, as a child, had been sexually abused by a priest at a residential school. They worked together to redefine what has usually been portrayed as passive disassociation into an active refusal to participate. Wade said this approach allowed the man to see himself as a strong and capable person and he used that strength to make other positive changes in his life (Wade, 2003).

Although Wade's focus is on family therapy, the idea of honouring resistance has, since that day, grown into an important theme for my research project. Good things happen when you focus on individuals and redefine them as strong, capable people rather than victims. In a therapy environment, Wade encouraged people who had suffered abuse to reframe their actions in this way. He found that this redefinition helped them to see themselves as powerful people capable of making positive changes in their lives (Wade, 1997).

I wanted to explore whether this type of thinking could be applied to single mothers. I started thinking about myself as a single mother, other single mothers I knew personally and my research participants. These women, including myself, certainly were not the stupid-lazy-failures that society said they were (see *Chapter One* for a detailed discussion of the stereotypes associated with single mothers). In contrast to that characterization, these women repeatedly came across as smart, hard working and, given their circumstances, very successful. It occurred to me that they deserved to be acknowledged and honoured. When these women were students, they were very driven by what they did not want to be. In what follows, I argue that these women were resisting society's stereotypical definition of their circumstances. Could their resistance, like the resistance that Wade (1997) defined, deserve honouring because it was an important contributor to their success?

For a while I seemed to be on my own with this idea of education as resistance but I was relieved to find Adair (2003). Here, she applies Michel Foucault's arguments from *Disciplined and Punished* to the lives of low-income single mothers as a way of explaining how "poor, single welfare mothers and their children are physically inscribed,

punished, and displayed as the dangerous and pathological Other” (p. 28). She honours the survival and success poor women enjoy, stating that,

despite the rhetoric and policy that mark and mutilate our bodies, poor women survive... In response to the material deprivations fostered by economic inequity and punishing public policy, many poor women work together to resist power and attempt to rewrite their value and place in the world by entering educational programs. (p. 42)

Adair, one of the most prolific and respected writers on the subject of post-secondary education for low-income single mothers, inspired me throughout this research project and I was relieved to find her honouring resistance.

Christopher’s (2005) *Welfare Recipients Attending College: The Interplay of Oppression and Resistance* also demonstrates that, while most of her participants were disadvantaged in educational institutions because they were poor single mothers on welfare, these students nevertheless resisted their oppression and that resistance contributed to their success.

Solitary Journey

Low-income single mothers are, by the nature of their circumstances, often forced into fairly isolated existences. In the introductory chapter of her book *Unsung Heroines: Single Mothers and the American Dream* Ruth Sidel (2006), who grew up in a single parent home, discusses what it was like for her father who was the single parent and contrasts that to the lives of the single mothers who were the subjects of her study. This contrast provides some insight into why single mothers are, and may even choose to be isolated. She describes her father as being given the position of social hero:

What is most fascinating is that my father was never vilified, never criticized for being a single parent. In fact, my father was widely admired and praised. Because he was raising a daughter alone, he was seen as caring, self-sacrificing, truly committed to his family. No one ever suggested (I don't think they would have dared) that he should work or not work outside the home, relinquish any social life (quite the contrary!), or not leave me in the care of others to go on vacation. (p. 20)

She contrasts her father's situation with the life of the single mothers that were the subject of her study:

Not only do single mothers have the sole or primary responsibilities for feeding, clothing, housing and nurturing their children often with grossly inadequate social and economic resources, but they must function in an environment in which they are constantly being judged and criticized—a social and political context in which they are systematically stereotyped, stigmatized, and even despised. (p. 21)

Although some participants in my study talked about the encouragement they got from role models who helped them make the decision to go back to school, all of them reported that once they were in school, they were pretty much on their own with very little support. Participants reported that while their children were at daycare or in school they had to focus all of their attention on classes, schoolwork and other chores. They did not have time for socializing or extracurricular school activities. They often lived in accommodations not suited to entertaining and even when their children were asleep they could not afford the childcare that would allow them to go out and socialize. For my participants that time was usually reserved as a precious study period. They did not have

anyone else sharing in the household work and could not afford to hire help; they had to do it all on their own.

It is particularly interesting that these women did not necessarily report being on their own as such a bad thing and some believed that the solitary nature of their journey actually helped them succeed. They knew that it was all up to them and they were the ones that had to make it happen. Freda said:

It is not a bad thing to feel that you have to rely on yourself; it forces you to draw on all the resources that you have got. It sort of forces you to focus and get rid of all fantasies and nonsense and get right down to what can I actually do and then do it. I had to stay very, very, very, very focused.

Linda acknowledges some financial support from her parents to help her obtain housing but otherwise she described her situation as being alone with her two children. In fact she remembers the only time she had a break: "At one point I had a friend watch the kids for a few days when I went away." When Jean was in the final years of her education degree and living in the same town as her extended family, she said she still

couldn't just turn around and pick up the phone and ask someone to come over because everybody else had their lives too. So there was not any reliance. I think for the most part I managed it all on my own. I did it all by myself.

All of the women expressed how hard it was to be a single mother and a student and all of them said that they were alone with their children. While they were grateful for what support they did receive, it was not a constant feature of their lives; they all revealed that they had very little outside support.

The experience of the women in my study is in apparent contrast to Buechner (1996), who studied the experiences of 19 low-income single mothers who successfully completed post-secondary education programs. She identified “vital or other social support systems” as one of the key conditions that contributed to participant’s success. While Buechner’s analysis seems contradictory to mine, her description and the data that she uses to illustrate this particular condition of success are actually similar to my own findings. The first data she highlights is that eight out of 19 participants mentioned that it was their children who were their strongest support system. I question whether this is an indicator of social support or instead of social isolation.

Beuchner goes on to provide examples where family and friends were not supportive. One example is Mickey, a mother of four, who

quit a “fairly good” factory job against the advice of her parents and friends to return to school and pursue her degree in nursing. She said her parents were not supportive of this decision; they couldn’t understand why she would quit a “good job” to go on welfare so she could go back to school. (p. 80)

Participants in my study noted similarly unsupportive family and friends. Freda said she didn’t even tell her family that she had applied to law school; “if I didn’t get accepted I didn’t want them to know I had applied and have another excuse to see me as a failure. I don’t find my family very supportive in that way. They were very critical.” June said her mother thought she was “totally nuts” for wanting to go to school and that she should just go get a job. She said no one in her family was supportive; “no I had almost no support except from my friends and my kids weren’t against it.” Jennifer felt that she had to distance herself from her family and her community because “whenever somebody in a

group like that makes a decision to make a change, it creates fear and they want you to stay home. There wasn't a lot of negative messaging but there wasn't really a lot of support." Joyce never felt she had support from her family to pursue education, even when she was younger in England, and when her teacher tried to convince her mother that Joyce should write her A levels, she knew it wouldn't happen. When I asked her in the interview if she had support from family, she said that when she told her mother she had been accepted and was going to law school, she got the "usual response: 'Well I guess that is ok if you pass but I don't know why you'd give up a good job to do it.' So lots of support there [laughs]."

The significance of outlining the solitary nature of these women's experience is two fold. First, it acknowledges that they own their success; they did it, they did it on their own and they succeeded because they were hard working, focused and organized. These women were acting as tough lone rangers, not isolated victims. Why is it that this position might be viewed in such a positive light for a man (i.e., the independent guy who doesn't put up with anyone, and goes off and gets it done, his own way), but somehow it does not seem to evoke the same response when we are discussing women and especially mothers? Does the stereotype rule to such a degree that we end up saying that she could not have done it on her own, that she doesn't deserve all the credit? Are well-intentioned researchers such as Buechner (1996) looking a little too hard to find others who helped make it happen or do they just want to believe that society and families are more supportive than they really are?

Wade recognized that people who are oppressed by abuse are often isolated, but he also recognized the importance of their resistance. They need to conceal their

resistance from their abuser but they do a great deal to protect themselves and, if present, their children. People who are abused are forced, by the isolated nature of their circumstances, to be independent, creative, persistent and tough in their resistance. Often their abuser has ensured that they have no one else on whom they can rely.

Single mothers are oppressed and isolated not by the abuse of an individual but by the attitudes of society. They may feel that they cannot ask for help because of how they are viewed by society. Their isolation and their need to develop creative ways to provide for themselves and their children becomes part of their resistance.

If single mothers were to ask for help then maybe they would, in some way, be buying into the stereotype of the lazy single mother, or maybe they are afraid that if they ask for help, they would be giving someone an opportunity to blame them, or criticize them and they cannot afford the risk. They must stay strong for themselves and for their children. Low-income single mothers who are students cannot afford interactions that will drain and weaken them and all too often that is all they are offered. The resistance in this situation takes the form of isolation and it can actually fuel their success. Harris (2003) describes how she felt as a student who was a single mother:

Going to school is hard. I am currently a first-year law student, and the work is often staggering, but it is the other battles that erode my stamina. At times I feel as though I have to fight against the world. In any given week I simultaneously do battle with the court system, the welfare department, biased teachers and ignorant students, and damaging public images. Many times, I retreat to the arms of my beautiful and innocent daughter as a much needed refuge against the battering I experience in the world because of my race, my class, and my gender. At other

times, when everyone rejects, hurts, and denies me, it simply increases my resolve to continue my battle. (p. 137)

My participant, Jean, actually felt that school was her retreat:

For me school was my outlet. Like some people might think school was tough—and it was tough—but for me what was really tough was dealing with all the personal issues. What was easy was going to school and escaping it all. I separated the two. When I went to school I just completely focused on school and all that other crap that I was dealing with and everything else it just stayed put where it needed to be. It was like I put it away when I went to class.

Resistance in this isolated format requires these single mothers to develop a host of creatively employed coping skills so they and their children can survive, all on their own. When they apply these isolated single mother coping skills to their student lives then what happens? Redefined within the context of student life, they become very focused, very organized students who isolate themselves so they get their work done, no matter what. The skills that women develop as single mothers make them good students. All participants reported that school was hard, but not compared to some of the other situations they had dealt with in their lives.

I am not a failure

Most of the participants talked about their fear of failure and some of them already saw themselves as failures because of teenage pregnancies or failed marriages. Others did not really believe they were failures but knew they had been labelled as failures by society and sometimes even by family and friends. Participants resisted this label and went to great lengths to prove to themselves and others that they were not

failures. This fear motivated them to stick with it and finish their programs. Joyce said of her first semester of law school: “I was just cramming you know 20 hours a day, I was scared to death that I was going to fail.” June said, “I think society already half expects you to fail.” Jean mentioned that she always carried an “I will not fail” mantra with her. Although she contemplated quitting many times in her first four months she said that she was “not going home to say I couldn’t do this.” When Joyce entered law school she said it was “horrendous, I was absolutely convinced I was going to fail.” When asked what advice she would have for other single mothers thinking about returning to school she said:

Believe in yourself totally—never give up. Just have something that drives you no matter what is, whether it’s stupid or even an improper motive. If it has to be as blatant as money, just say to yourself, I want the best for my son or my daughter. I am better than this. Whatever it takes to get you up every morning and going to bed at two or three in the morning sometimes. At times when you think, I can’t do this anymore. Just turning that switch off and not listening to that voice, just keep on going.

All of the participants felt that they had been labelled as failures. Some had even accepted the label and going back to school was a way to fight back, resist and hopefully get rid of it by proving to themselves they were not. Others knew that they were unfairly judged yet still wanted and needed to succeed. They were all working hard for themselves and their children, but they also seemed to want to prove to others, such as their family, friends and society that they were not failures. Resisting the failure label drove them very hard toward success.

The root of the resistance

While all of the participants resisted being labelled as failures, the nature of this resistance revealed two important themes. June and Jean were most strongly focused on resisting the stupid or ignorant label they felt they had been given as young single parents. They wanted to know, and they wanted others to know, that they were indeed intelligent women. It is interesting that even their program choice seemed to be influenced by the nature of their resistance; they both became teachers. Three of the participants, Freda, Jennifer, and Joyce, revealed that they were most strongly resisting poverty. Again, their choice of program seemed very much related because ultimately they all became lawyers.

Linda's resistance was not so clearly defined but did have elements of both types of resistance. While she despised being seen as an uneducated person and wanted very much to go to university, she felt constrained by the welfare system that only permitted her to take short-term programs leading directly to employment. She worked that system as best she could and did eventually get a good job because, more importantly, she was also resisting poverty and used whatever limited opportunities she had to find a way to provide for her family.

I am not "stupid" and deserve an education

Both June and Jean married before finishing high school and they both became parents when they were quite young. For different reasons, they both felt that they had been denied an education and therefore they were not seen as intelligent. Jean said her high school failed her and the decision to quit in grade 11 made sense to her because she was not being challenged, just pushed through the system. June was forced to quit when

she got pregnant and got married. June says the need to prove herself intellectually pushed her through:

It rang in my head when my ex-husband in an argument once said something about me being stupid. I really didn't want to prove him right and I didn't want to prove my Mother right when she said "I was nuts for going to University." Even my divorce lawyer who was a woman, a progressive lawyer even, said: "Are you sure you want to do this? You know this is a very hard long struggle." Well, I wasn't positive I was smart enough but I knew that I could work hard. I had to prove to myself that I could learn on my own, that I was smart enough, smart enough to be a teacher.

Jean was driven and worked tremendously hard to get very high marks. She described a perfectionist streak in her that related to her upbringing:

I came out of an alcoholic home and all the other stuff that is associated with that type of situation. I think that sometimes when you are a helpless child and you don't have control over your life when you become an adult you realize, I can have control over certain things in my life and I can do pretty good on what I have control over and so I learned that probably by the time I was 18.

She graduated from her teacher-training program with great distinction, the highest recognition she could get in the program. She remembers that even after she proved her intelligence to herself she continued to be judged unfairly:

I am a single parent and I am First Nations, and visibly you can tell. I think people still undermine my ability to do well on the job. People still sort of look at you in a different light so I think that you can be a single mom and whatever, but race

has a big factor. People are really surprised—people will say what do you do for a living and I say, well, I am a teacher, and where do you teach and I say Yukon College. I don't know what it is... It was like they looked at me and thought: "Oh well, she is Native, she is a single mom; she must be bagging groceries at Superstore," or something like that. When I tell them what it is that I do, they are floored.

June, Linda and Joyce all became parents as teenagers. Society judges teenaged mothers most severely. They are told that the serious mistake they have made by becoming pregnant will have lifelong negative consequences (SmithBattle, 2000) and that because of their very young age they are inadequate mothers (Luttrell, 2003). My participants reported various consequences of the societal judgement they felt and they all felt that they had been labelled as "stupid girls." But it was also imperative that they rejected this label. The rejection happened differently for each one and occurred at different life stages.

Linda knew, from aptitude tests, that she was intelligent but she also knew that people were not able to see her intelligence both because she was a very young parent and also because she had been denied the opportunity to exercise her intelligence through a university education. She acknowledges that a series of short-term college courses did help her get a good job and then she was able to climb the corporate ladder and she felt very good about that. However, she still carried the "stigma" of someone who should have gone to university and should have gotten a degree.

June waited until she was in her thirties, just after she left her husband, to fulfill the life-long dream of becoming a teacher. Although she was still afraid that she might

not be smart enough, she gave it her best and succeeded. It was only after she graduated that she felt like she had successfully beaten the “stupid” label. Joyce, on the other hand, knew from a very young age that she liked school and got good grades but, as is the case for many teenage mothers, her schooling was interrupted by pregnancy. Like June, Joyce did not return to school until her marriage ended. Joyce, however, was also very motivated by her resistance to poverty and she continued working full-time while she went back to school in the evenings. Joyce completed a number of programs this way. With each success Joyce confirmed that she “gained confidence and developed bigger dreams and bigger challenges for herself.” She said, “there was always something to prove” and, because she was both young and Black she carried even more of a stigma and had to “doubly prove herself.” Resisting the stigma by challenging herself intellectually through a series of post-secondary programs, and her constant quest for financial security finally resulted in Joyce becoming a lawyer and having her own law practice.

Later life education for teenage mothers remains a relatively unstudied area with most studies reinforcing the stereotypes by focusing solely on the period immediately after the birth of the first child and only on the immediate ability to finish high school. The title of one recent book *Pregnant bodies, Fertile minds* (Luttrell, 2003) better captures the reality of teenage mothers. Luttrell studied teenage mothers and, even though she looked at the time of their first birth, she dispels the myths and reveals the incredible mistreatment of teenage mothers in our society today, even by those who are trying to help them. The few studies of the later life education of teenage mothers have shown that, like June, Linda and Joyce, a significant number of teenage mothers continue their education and do so throughout their adult lives (Dechman, 2000a; Rich & Kim, 1999).

Poverty and welfare: Not for me

As pointed out in Chapter One, poverty is not a myth; it is a reality for over half of Canada's single mothers. All the participants made reference to not wanting to be poor and, for all of them, it was a motivator to return to school. But for three, Joyce, Freda, and Jennifer, it was more significant than that; their fear of poverty clearly defined their resistance and helped shape their academic successes.

Joyce grew up in a poor family always reliant on social housing. She said that because of that experience she developed a strong desire to have a different, less impoverished future for herself and her child; "I didn't want him to live a life below the poverty line. There was no way I wanted that—it wasn't going to happen... I just didn't want to go back ever to that council sort of situation and not having any money." Even though Joyce completed a number of educational programs, she always evaluated them according to their potential to increase her earnings because "there was always this insecurity with money."

Unlike Joyce, Freda did not experience poverty in her family of origin. Her resistance to poverty revealed itself more as resistance to the "welfare mom" stereotype. She felt that if she depended on welfare, she would be doomed to a life of poverty. Freda already had a degree when she became a single parent, but it was a liberal arts degree with no particular focus. She said she returned to school "to develop the ability to have a decent source of income... you have to have enough money for a decent home." She stated that a student loans officer suggested that she apply for welfare because she would probably get more money, but Freda would not: "I had this absolute terror of falling into

the social welfare trap and never being able to get out. I saw it like a lobster trap.” Freda resisted the stereotype and that resistance translated into motivation:

I felt that if I didn’t kept going forward I would fall back into a welfare pit. I didn’t have any alternatives. There were many times I wanted to quit. I would get depressed and think it was too hard but there was this monster nipping at my heels. If I didn’t keep motivated, keep focused, keep working, I would fall into the void.

Freda did not quit. Instead her resistance, translated into motivation, pushed her to graduate in the top ten percent of her law school class.

Jennifer said she came from “a background of poverty and deprivation and when that happens to you—you always grow up with a sense that you need to get to the other side because the other side looks better.” Jennifer’s resistance to poverty also helped her get through the tough times. There were many times she felt like quitting but then she would think of her sister’s life, and be determined not to live a “hand to mouth” existence. She said she knew “it was worth it to be there.” She acknowledges that she chose the legal profession because it was a “prestigious profession, powerful profession and an intelligent profession... It was all of these things that society attributes to this particular profession and for me it was a desired thing to be.” Getting a law degree was her way of resisting poverty and ensuring that she would never be poor again.

We made it because we resisted

These women succeeded because they resisted. They fought hard against the negative stereotypes and poverty that are so much part of the lives of single mothers in Canada. When they felt like quitting, the fear of failure and the fact that they might

become “one of those” single mothers provided the fuel they needed to push themselves forward. All of these single mothers were able to finish their programs, and most went on to finish a series of post-secondary programs. Each of these women went on to have satisfying careers and was able to become the kind of mother they wanted to be, one who could adequately provide for her family. Some of these women were so motivated that, despite the demands and stresses of being single mothers, they graduated at the top of their classes. None of these women said the journey was easy. On the contrary they said it was very, very difficult.

Linda was the only woman in my study who had difficulty using her resistance strategies to overcome the stereotypes and realize her dreams. Linda was forced, more than the others, to make do. She was also the only woman in my study who was collecting social assistance while she attended post-secondary education. Did social assistance policy prevent her from realizing her goals? Did too much of her energy have to go to “working the system” and leave her too exhausted to develop and maintain a resistance strategy that would help her realize what she really wanted. Linda was the only one of the participants that seemed to have settled for less.

In the United States, it has become harder for people on social assistance to engage in post-secondary education at the university level, but U.S. policies remain more encouraging than social assistance policies in Canada. Welfare reform in the US provoked Jennings (2004) to study a group of students who were single mothers on welfare. Jennings concluded, as I have, that for the women in her study “education was a way to transcend controlling images of welfare mothers.” For the women in this study, education represented both economic stability and social respect. It is hard to understand

how any single mothers on welfare in Canada can develop effective resistance strategies and realize their own dreams when, for the most part, social assistance policy in Canada ensures that people on welfare are not allowed to attend post-secondary education unless it is very short-term training that leads directly to employment.

hooks: Education as the practice of freedom

hooks, like Freire, believes that education, at its best, in the form of engaged pedagogy, gives people the opportunity to develop critical thinking skills;

critical thinking was the primary element allowing the possibility for change... no matter what one's class, race, gender or social standing... without the capacity to think critically about our selves and our lives, none of us would be able to move forward, to change, to grow. (1994b, p. 202)

Like hooks (1994b), I believe, the practice of freedom can be achieved through education and education can provide a place of discovery and ultimately assist individuals to escape from poverty and oppression. hooks asserts:

Learning is a place where paradise can be created. The classroom, with all its limitations, remains a location of possibility. In that field of possibility we have the opportunity to labor for freedom, to demand of ourselves and our comrades, an openness of mind and heart that allows us to face reality even as we collectively imagine ways to move beyond boundaries, to transgress. This is education as the practice of freedom. (hooks, 1994b, p. 207)

What, if any, transformative/freeing experience, to which hooks refers, took place when these single mothers attended post-secondary programs?

The participants all felt some transforming or freeing experience; they all believed it was absolutely worth it to return to school. Some felt the freeing experience more strongly than others and two also reported negatively on at least a part of their educational experience.

Linda described her first eight-week introductory all-women trades course in a positive way and was pleased that it led to some employment for her. "It was great—I really enjoyed it. I got to do welding, a bit of mechanics, carpentry. It was all women so that was really neat. It was a very positive experience." After that Linda describes her educational experiences as quite negative and makes it quite clear that although she still viewed it as "absolutely worth it to have gone to school," sometimes school itself made her feel like a failure:

In fact, I probably felt like a failure each time I came out of one of those courses. I really felt like a failure when I came out of the mechanics course. You know to me that was one of those times in your life where you say that is kind of the end of a dream.

In the interview I asked Joyce's about the possibility of further education and her response captures the essence of hooks' quote quite eloquently as she recognized both the limitations and the opportunity:

I swore I would never go to school after I finished my law degree. It was like a nightmare, I hated it. Being with young people it was all these kids that came from wealthy families and that everything was handed to them. You know I just didn't want to be around them again. But now I am starting to feel like maybe there is a master's degree down the line. There are areas of law that might be

interesting or unexplored... At this point it would be the challenge. Am I bright enough, or can I be disciplined enough to write a thesis?

For Freda, education was definitely a transformative and freeing experience. Talking about her time at law school, she said:

It gave me a sense that I was on sort of an upward slope, that I was getting somewhere in life rather than a plateau or even a downward slope and I think that was quite important to me—to feel like I had a future. It gave me the confidence that if I make up my mind that I want to do something I can probably do it. If I decide it is important enough and I am willing to spend the time and the energy and the work and that is kind of enabling.

June describes how much she loved university and how fundamental it was to developing her intellectual confidence.

I just totally loved it. I just really loved going to class. At 31, I was a dry sponge, because I was so interested in everything I was learning. I just couldn't wait to get to class and I am sociable so I loved being with everyone and I love writing so I loved my assignments. It was so worth it to go to school, totally, totally because the thing in my life I was so confident as a parent and as a person but I didn't have confidence intellectually. I didn't know if I could cut it. So, therefore, it was the missing piece of the puzzle that gave me confidence. Once I got my degree, I had more confidence.

For Jean, going away to school gave her the opportunity and the freedom to deal with some of the tough stuff:

It was probably one of the best things I did in my life because I separated myself from my family and got to deal with some personal issues from my childhood and got to be successful at school and meet some really nice people in the process of doing all of that. For me, school was my outlet. Like some people might think school was tough—and it was tough—but for me what was really tough was dealing with all the personal issues. What was easy was going to school and escaping it all. I think at the same time you gain knowledge you also gain more self-esteem.

Jennifer looks back fondly on her many years away at university, saying “the university environment, it was exciting, it was fun, it was being exposed to things that were fascinating. I also met people at university that are still close friends.”

All of the participants believed that going back to school made a real and very positive difference to their lives. Education for them was key. Without it, they all believe their lives would have been a lot less satisfying and much, much harder; without it each participant feels they would have ended up being “one of those” struggling single mothers.

The research, especially when written by low-income mothers who have gone on to post-secondary education, confirms the findings of this study and echoes hooks belief that education can be part of the practice of freedom. Here I repeat a quotation used in Chapter One from the book *Reclaiming Class: Women, Poverty, and the Promise of Higher Education in America*. Single mothers have written most of the papers in the collection:

The women who have contributed to this collection are also associated with higher education and view its structure, culture, and policies from the vantage point of poverty. Although we recognize that education is not a unilateral solution to poverty, we also know that we have survived and positively changed our lives and those of our families through the process and products of post-secondary education. Most of us survived in an environment that sought to exclude, punish, and vilify us because we were poor. We are living proof of both the pejorative power of public policy based on stereotypes of poor women and the liberating and revolutionary potential of higher education. (Adair & Dahlberg, 2003, p. 2)

In this book Harris (2003) also captures the essence of hooks:

Despite the way I have been treated by family, in welfare offices and even in the courts, I have continued to pursue the education that altered my life. I entered higher education and fought to stay in school because I needed an education. I needed an education to learn, to grow, and to strengthen and hone my thinking, reading, and writing skills. I needed an education to regain self-esteem, purpose, and focus. I needed an education to fight against the debilitating stereotypes that confronted and confounded me at every turn. And finally, I needed an education for the credentials and authority required to change my life and the life of my daughter economically and socially. (p. 136)

Adair found that:

In school I gained new and valuable work and life skills that involved the cognitive and technical abilities to communicate, organize, analyze, and think critically and creatively. I gained confidence as I acquired cultural capital and

accrued a sense of worth as a “knowledgeable” and “thinking” citizen. More important, learning to think critically enable me to envision myself in a new horizon, to reflect on life from a new vista and, as a result, to reconceptualise my place, voice, and value in the world. (p. 46)

My research findings, and most of the qualitative research that gets to the heart of the stories of single mothers experience with post-secondary education, affirms that education is key to escaping the poverty and stereotypes that ruled their lives. Here, education is what it should be—the practice of freedom.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

This qualitative research study focused on the experiences of six women who were single mothers when they attended and completed post-secondary education programs. The general purpose was to document the paths these women followed to achieve academic success. More specifically, the purpose was to identify evidence of their resistance to poverty and stereotypes of single mothers and to explore how that resistance might have contributed to their success.

Following, I present brief assessments of the components of the research project and discuss possible further research and implications for public policy.

The social context

Statistics paint a grim picture of the social conditions of Canadian low-income single mothers, especially Aboriginal single mothers. I spent much more time than originally planned developing a statistical profile of this group by engaging in primary research using the raw census Canada data files. Even though this was time consuming I felt that it was essential for two reasons. First, what was contained in the literature was so variable that I could not piece together a reliable profile of this group. Second, I realized that if I wanted to use the profile to define the problem, without reinforcing the stereotypes, I needed to present a clear picture of some of the within-group variation.

Negative myths and stereotypes regularly create barriers for single mothers, especially low-income single mothers and single mothers on social assistance (Adair, 2001; Adair & Dahlberg, 2003; Bashevkin, 2002; Holyfield, 2002; Jennings, 2004). One of the goals of this research was to help replace some of the stereotypes about low-income single mothers with more realistic portrayals of their lives and in some small way

I think it helped. Repeating what Ganong and Coleman (1995) about the public policy implications of single mother stereotypes:

Even policy makers who do not subscribe to all the characteristics identified as stereotypes in this study may find their efforts to develop policies and programs hampered by public opinion that is informed by these beliefs. For example, since never married mothers are seen as more likely than other mothers to be “irresponsible,” “stupid,” “drug abusers” who are “unable to successfully raise children,” policy makers may find it easier to institute punitive rather than supportive policies and programs for these mothers. (p. 510)

More research is needed that refutes the stereotypes. What kind of wonderful social assistance policies and programs might we have if society believed that single mothers were actually hard-working, intelligent, good people who deserved a little help.

This study revealed that barriers are even greater for teenage mothers, and aboriginal single mothers. More research is needed that focuses on the unique context of their lives and their educational needs and experiences.

Much of the recent research on the post-secondary experiences of single mothers has been written in the United States in response to the 1996 welfare reform initiatives that made it more difficult for people on welfare, including single mothers, to pursue education. A number of scholars, who had the opportunity to study as low-income single mothers, have gone on to publish some of the most provocative and convincing arguments against welfare reform and in favour of maintaining access to post-secondary education for low-income single mothers (Adair, 2001; Adair & Dahlberg, 2003; Holyfield, 2002). Some of these women were able to remain on welfare for the duration

of their studies. Even after welfare reform some states have welfare policies that allow recipients to receive benefits for up to two years of study at the institution of their choice before any additional work requirements are added. Reading this body of work and learning of my participant, Linda, and her experience made me realize that access to education for low-income single mothers, especially those reliant on social assistance, may be even more limited in Canada than it is in the US.

Canadian jurisdictions have social assistance policies that only allow recipients to engage in very short educational programs that will lead directly to employment. In Canada the administration of student financial assistance programs and social assistance programs are very separate. Are low-income single mothers falling through the cracks of our social safety net? In order to answer that question more research is needed on how, within a Canadian political context, the various social and student financial assistance policies and programs affect low-income single mothers who want, and need, to further their education.

Although the single mother stereotype is a reality in Canadian society I hope that by presenting this research and recording the stories of these amazing women a few of the myths and stereotypes will be eroded and replaced with a fairer understanding of the realities of the lives of hard working single mothers. After years of noticing and being angered by stereotypical portrayals of single mothers in the media, I am also encouraged to have recently found two stories in the September 2007 issue of *Canadian Living* magazine that profiled single mothers in a positive way. One story celebrated a woman's back to school experience and the other was a report on two women, both single mothers, who had won the magazine's best friends makeover contest. I am not sure that *Canadian*

Living would have dared to present and celebrate single mothers in such a way even five years ago. I do not know if this is real progress, but these stories need to be told and *Canadian Living* is going to reach a much wider audience than my thesis ever will and that brings me hope.

This study revealed that single mothers have very high participation rates in both full and part-time education. They are a legitimate segment of the student population and more research is needed on how student financial assistance programs and institutional requirements impact on this group, and how they could be improved to ensure that their needs are met.

The methodology

Choosing a qualitative approach and an open interview style worked very well for this type of study and I would not hesitate to use it again. Integrating case study approaches with biographical approaches provided the opportunity I wanted to honour and respect my participants. The loosely chronological approach I took to the theme-based analysis provided enough structure without losing the essence of each person's unique experience.

More longitudinal research is needed to reveal the positive affects of education on the lives of single mothers and their families. Unfortunately, the experiences of the few women that can be captured in qualitative studies cannot be generalized. Longitudinal data is needed to reveal the long-term impact trends of education on the earnings of single mothers. This type of research would benefit from a quantitative approach and it would likely help to seriously refute those like Kapsalis and Tourigny (2002) who still believe that trying to educate low-income single mothers is a waste of time because it

doesn't make any difference anyway and that their best route out of poverty is to find someone to marry.

Resistance

All participants revealed that they resisted the poverty and stereotypes associated with being a single mother. Whether they referred to the stigmas or their fears it was clear that none of them wanted to be "one of those" single mothers.

In the interviews, participants were asked to tell me about their back to school experience. As expected, most told their stories in a chronological fashion. They told me about their decision to go to school, their time at school and then reflected on the value of the experience and how it impacted on them and on their families. It was clear that all of these women were highly motivated by what they did *not* want to be. Freire's idea of critical consciousness, applied in this context, proved to be an essential component of each woman's decision to go back to school. Each of my participants knew what Holyfield wants all low-income single mothers to know, that "there are better things out there." While critical consciousness is a key ingredient, it cannot and should not be simplified into just needing to "want it enough" to succeed. Participants also revealed some of the key opportunities that helped them make decisions to pursue further education. For two of them it was newly available post-secondary funding, for another three it was a universities flexible mature student admission policies, and for some it was the freedom from the constraints of married life. For all of them, access to good quality childcare and affordable housing were important factors. More research is needed on the opportunities that make a difference in low-income single mothers' lives and that could help them make decisions to return to school.

I have not found Wade's idea of honouring the resistance specifically referenced in an educational context, but Sandy SmithMadsen (2003) declares that "educating welfare women is the stuff of revolutions" (p. 13). My research reveals that these women did use resistance as an effective weapon in their battle against the oppression they felt. It makes sense to honour that resistance because it clearly contributed to their success. More research is needed to discover if Wade's approach to resistance applied to the educational context might somehow be useful in helping other single mothers realize their dreams. Could it be incorporated into a promotional campaign encouraging more single mothers to consider returning to school or into a counselling environment aimed at helping single mothers succeed once they are enrolled in a post-secondary education?

There is no doubt that, for the participants of this study and any other low-income single mother who has been able to complete a post-secondary educational program, that education is liberating and can be positioned as the practice of freedom. This work is inspirational and we need to find ways to convey the messages to encourage other single mothers to consider furthering their education. I may want to seek funding to convert what I have learned through this research into a self-help type of book or other publications could be freely distributed to single mothers who may be considering furthering their education.

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